University of Alberta

Voices From the Field: The Practice of Educational Assistants Working in Classrooms With Students Who Have Severe Behavior Disorders

by

Janice Sundmark

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Department of Elementary Education

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 2003

National Library of Canada
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

Acquisitions and Bibliographic Services
Acquisisitons et services bibliographiques

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 0-612-88083-4
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 0-612-88083-4

The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou aturement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this dissertation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de ce manuscrit.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the dissertation.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

Canada

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Voices From the Field: The Practice of Educational Assistants Working in Classrooms With Students Who Have Severe Behavior Disorders** submitted by Janice Sundmark in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

Dr. Joyce M. Bainbridge, Supervisor

Dr. Katherine J. Willson

Dr. Susan E. Gibson

Dr. William G. Magnes

Dr. Tara J. Fenwick

Dr. C. T. Patrick Diamond, External Examiner

University of Alberta

Library Release Form

Name of Author:	Janice Sundmark
Title of Thesis:	**Voices From the Field: The Practice of Educational Assistants Working in Classrooms With Students Who Have Severe Behavior Disorders**
Degree:	Doctor of Education
Year This Degree Granted:	2003

Permission is hereby granted to the University of Alberta Library to reproduce single copies of this thesis and to lend or sell such copies for private, scholarly, or scientific research purposes only.

The author reserves all other publication and other rights in association with the copyright in the thesis, and except as hereinbefore provided, neither the thesis nor any substantial portion thereof may be printed or otherwise reproduced in any material form whatever without the author's prior written permission.

To all those educational assistants who work with students with challenging and unique educational needs on a daily basis. It is through your commitment to these students that they are developing their potential to become the individuals they are capable of being.

Abstract

This qualitative study seeks to understand the perceptions held by educational assistants of the nature of their practice in working with students who have severe behavior disorders and who are educated within inclusive classrooms. Research to date has identified the duties of educational assistants, but research from the perspective of educational assistants is limited in the literature. As the number of educational assistants employed by school boards continues to increase, there is growing concern over how to optimize their skills. The research questions this study is designed to address are, *How do educational assistants perceive their practice working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders? What kinds of support do educational assistants perceive they need in order to do their work effectively? What are the issues that educational assistants view as relevant to their work? What are the roles and responsibilities that educational assistants associate with their practice?*

In this study six educational assistants from primary, elementary, and junior high school placements who were nominated by their principals as effective in their work participated in individual and focus group interviews.

The following five themes were identified as affecting the educational assistant's practice: (a) teacher's knowledge, (b) teacher's classroom leadership, (c) administrative support, (d) terms and conditions of their employment, and (e) skills required by educational assistants.

Key findings focused on (a) the importance of teachers' and administrators' understanding of the work of educational assistants, (b) the importance of educational assistants' building relationships with staff and students, (c) the importance of

understanding how the role of the educational assistant has changed, and (d) the need for educational assistants' having the information necessary for them to do their work.

This study concludes with recommendations about the ways in which educational assistants can be supported to increase the effectiveness of their work with students and teachers.

Acknowledgements

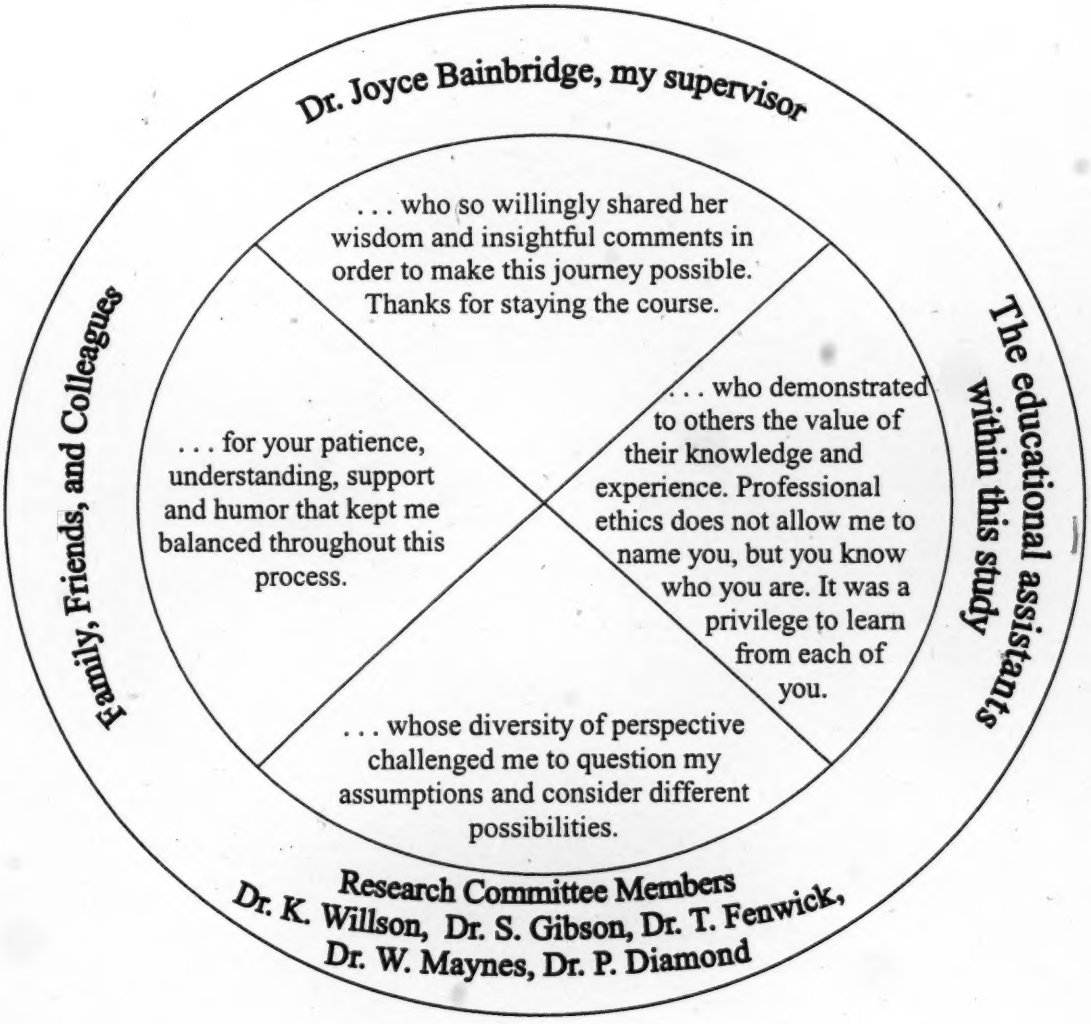

Dr. Joyce Bainbridge, my supervisor
. . . who so willingly shared her wisdom and insightful comments in order to make this journey possible. Thanks for staying the course.
. . . who demonstrated to others the value of their knowledge and experience. Professional ethics does not allow me to name you, but you know who you are. It was a privilege to learn from each of you.
. . . whose diversity of perspective challenged me to question my assumptions and consider different possibilities.
. . . for your patience, understanding, support and humor that kept me balanced throughout this process.
The educational assistants within this study
Research Committee Members
Dr. K. Willson, Dr. S. Gibson, Dr. T. Fenwick, Dr. W. Maynes, Dr. P. Diamond
Family, Friends, and Colleagues

Table of Contents

Page

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY 1

Purposes of the Study 6

Research Questions 7

Significance and Need for the Study 7

Assumptions 9

Limitations and Delimitations 10

Ethical Considerations 10

Outline of the Dissertation 11

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 13

Historical Overview of the Position 13

Inclusive Education 22

Philosophical Base 22

Implementation 25

Benefits to Students 26

Benefits to Teachers 28

Underlying Teacher Concerns 28

The Situated Nature of Practice 30

The New Sciences and Educational Practice 33

Existing Mechanistic Paradigm 33

Wholeness Rather Than Separate Parts 36

Complex Adaptive Systems 37

Page

Chapter Summary 41

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH 43

Selection of Participants 44

Demographics of the Participants 45

Research Timetable 45

Data Collection 47

Individual Interviews 48

Focus Group Interviews 49

Data Analysis 51

Role of the Researcher 56

Trustworthiness 58

Chapter Summary 60

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY 62

Section 1: Research Question 1 63

Theme 1: The Teacher's Knowledge 64

Understand the Role of the Educational Assistant in the Classroom 64

Support and Accommodate the Educational Assistant's Role in the Classroom 66

Provide Effective Classroom Behavior Management 69

Adapt Learning Materials and Modify Curriculum Activities and the Learning Environment 71

Value Inclusion 74

Page

Theme 2: The Teacher's Classroom Leadership 76

Provide Direction for the Student's Program 76

Clarify Expectations of Classroom Staff Positions 77

Support a Classroom Team Work Model 78

Share Ongoing Feedback With the Educational Assistant 79

Value Input from the Educational Assistant 80

Support Decisions Made by the Educational Assistant 82

Share Expertise and Information With the Educational Assistant 83

Enable the Assistant to Work With Other Students in the Class 86

Theme 3: The Required Administrative Support 87

Set a Tone for the Role of Educational Assistant in the School 87

Include Educational Assistants as Staff Members 88

View the Student's Program as a Shared Responsibility 90

Share Information with the Educational Assistant 91

Support Flexible Scheduling 94

Support Joint Planning Time for the Classroom Team 96

Determine the Educational Assistant's Placement 98

Evaluate the Educational Assistant's Work 100

Support Ongoing In-Service Learning 103

Theme 4: The Issues Related to Terms and Conditions of Employment 104

Shortage of Trained Educational Assistants to Work with Students Who Have Severe Behavior Disorders 104

Page

Compensation for Non-Student Contact Time 106
Hiring, Recall, Job Security, and Funding 107
Representation on Legal and Ethical Matters 110
Personal Safety 111
Section 2: Research Question 2 113
Theme 5: Personal and Professional Skills Required by Educational Assistants 113
In Relation to the Student(s) to Whom the Assistant is Assigned 113
In Relation to the Classroom Teacher(s) 122
In Relation to the Position of the Educational Assistant Within the School 124
Chapter Summary 134
CHAPTER FIVE: INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS 136
The Teachers' and Administrators' Understanding of the Work of Educational Assistants 137
The Complexity of the Educational Assistant's Position 137
The Importance of Valuing Colleagues 140
The Effect of the Teacher's Perception of the Educational Assistant's Position 143
The Importance of Valuing Diversity of Perspective 145
The Value of Committed Staff Members 147

Page

The Educational Assistant's Relationships with Staff and Students 150
The Importance of Building Relationships 150
The Importance of Building Trust 154
The Need for an Ethic of Caring 156
The Need to Be Connected 158
The Expanded Role of Educational Assistants 160
Increased Complexity of the Context of Classrooms 160
Increased Complexity of the Role of Educational Assistants 162
Increased Tension Between Job Description and Role 164
Shared Responsibility of Meeting Students' Needs 167
Needed Variety of Classroom Assignments 168
Required Classroom Team Work 169
The Need for Educational Assistants to Access Essential Information 174
Sharing Information 174
Allowing Information to Flow 177
Needing Ongoing Professional Development 179
Needing Constructive Feedback 181
Chapter Summary 186
CHAPTER SIX: ELABORATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY 188
Double Helix Metaphor 188
An Ecological Perspective of the Practice of Educational Assistants 190
The Influence of Systems 195

Recommendations for the Field 202

Reflections on the Research 206

Recommendations for Further Research 209

REFERENCES 210

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS 227

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE RESEARCH CONSENT FORM: SUPERINTENDENT 230

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM: PRINCIPAL 231

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE CONSENT FORM: EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANT 232

APPENDIX E: SAMPLE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS 233

APPENDIX F: SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS 235

APPENDIX G: SAMPLE COVER LETTER, FIRST FOCUS GROUP 236

APPENDIX H: SAMPLE FIRST FOCUS GROUP REVISED QUESTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS 237

APPENDIX I: SAMPLE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET 238

APPENDIX J: SAMPLE SECOND FOCUS GROUP COVER LETTER 239

APPENDIX K: SECOND FOCUS GROUP REVISED QUESTIONS 240

APPENDIX L: SAMPLE MEMBER CHECK LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS 241

List of Figures

Figure Page

1. Double Helix Metaphor 189

2. Ecological Web of Nested Educational Systems Influencing the Practice of Educational Assistants 197

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The implementation of inclusive education within Alberta has significantly influenced the practice of educational assistants and the number of educational assistants working in schools today. What was once viewed as a fairly consistent classroom job requiring clerical, 'housekeeping,' and monitoring duties, within mostly segregated, special education settings, has evolved into a position that requires a complex set of skills in a person able to work alongside regular classroom teachers. Many educational assistants now work as classroom support staff to provide adapted instructional and related services to students under the supervision of the classroom teacher.

There is a great deal of ambiguity associated with the practice of educational assistants as demonstrated by the variety of terms used to identify their position. Some of these terms include *teacher aides*, *support staff*, *program aides*, *teacher assistants*, *educational paraprofessionals*, *teaching assistants*, *instructional assistants,* to name a few. The most recent term coined by Pickett (1997) is *paraeducator*, to parallel titles such as *paralegal* and *paramedic* when referring to someone who works alongside the professional. For the purposes of this research the term *educational assistant* is used in the same way as that of teacher assistant outlined by the Council on Alberta Teaching Standards (2001): "A *teacher assistant* is any person employed to help a teacher in achieving the learning outcomes of the Alberta program of studies and approved educational objectives" (p. 1).

At this time neither provincial standards of practice nor ethical guidelines for the work of educational assistants exist, and decisions around the practice of educational

assistants are situational. Without a system of representation from an educational support group to determine acceptable standards of practice and competencies required of classroom support staff, there is great discrepancy among hiring practices, training requirements, job expectations, and the ways in which the skills of educational assistants are utilized within schools. As well, if a conflict develops between the teacher and the educational assistant, standards of practice and ethical guidelines of the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) support only the teacher's position. Representation for the educational assistant in these cases usually resides with the school principal, who interprets the board's policy in relation to educational assistants. The principal is also a member of the ATA and is in a conflict of interest as a mediator in resolving serious disputes between the teacher and the educational assistant when it involves ATA legal representation for the teacher.

The number of educational assistants employed by school boards has continued to increase within Alberta. Individuals hired into these positions could be placed on a continuum ranging from untrained community volunteers who are frequently parents of other children in the school, to individuals trained in other disciplines—for example, nurses as well as, certified educational assistants and interim teachers, all the way to certificated teachers.

A provincial Teacher Assistant Role Designation survey was completed in 1998 as a collaborative effort among the ATA, Grant MacEwan College, Red Deer College, and Medicine Hat College. The results of the survey confirmed that educational assistants are a necessary part of the education process but that there is growing concern over how best to utilize their skills. In Alberta, surveys completed by Black and Bunyan (1973),

Chamchuk (1973), Mitchell (1973), Hillier (1979), and GMCC, RDC, MHC, and ATA (1998), have produced lists of duties in which educational assistants may engage; however, documentation of what educational assistants actually do from the perspectives of educational assistants themselves is limited in the literature. A great deal of information was garnered from responses by educational assistants working in the field to an open-ended statement within the GMCC, RDC, MHC, and ATA survey that stated "Please feel free to make any further comments about the role of teacher assistants or this survey". Examples of the comments include the following:

> I find my work deeply rewarding when I can positively affect the educational life of a child.
>
> Most teachers are unsure of what our role is as assistants. They are unsure of what they can ask assistants to do or what we are capable of doing.
>
> Some teachers treat teacher assistants as team members and respect and encourage our input, while others look upon their TA as no more than a parent helper with no special training.
>
> The ATA is afraid we will undermine teachers' jobs, but that doesn't enter into the picture. I do not agree that TAs cannot teach—anyone who works with a child in any setting teaches the child, even if only through role modeling.
>
> An assistant working with a special-needs child means less disruption and stress for the teacher.

These comments made by education assistants in the field reflect the depth of their commitment to the students and teachers with whom they work, the perceived ambiguity held by teachers of the role of educational assistants in classrooms, the underlying potential for territorial issues related to classroom professional teaching practice, the challenges associated with defining the term 'teaching', and the potential value for teachers and students in optimizing the contribution of educational assistants within the classroom.

The focus of this study is on educational assistants who are assigned to work in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders. My own teaching experience, combined with conversations with teachers and principals, confirm that some of the most difficult students to teach within inclusive classrooms are students with severe behavior disorders. This seems largely due to the students' overwhelming resistance to learning and their lack of authentic acceptance by both teachers and students within the classroom. For the purposes of this study, students with severe behavior disorders include

> those students who display chronic, extreme and pervasive behaviors which require close and constant supervision, and other intensive support services in a highly structured environment in order to function in an education setting. The behaviors significantly interfere with both the learning and safety of the student and other students. (Alberta Learning, 1999)

Those assistants who successfully meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders demonstrate pedagogically sound practice that could resonate with educational assistants in other educational settings. It is this need for educational assistants who are successful in their practice to share their knowledge and experience with other practitioners in the field that makes this research important.

My interest in seeking a deeper understanding of the practice of educational assistants is grounded in my varied roles during the past 29 years of working in the field of education. As a school principal responsible and accountable to students, staff, the community and Alberta Learning, I realized 10 years ago that the resource base for education was not keeping pace with the increase in the identified needs of students and the public expectations of the education system. At that time it was apparent that all available resources needed to be optimized to their fullest extent. From my observations

and discussions with several educators it is clear that educational assistants are frequently underutilized or assigned inappropriate tasks that detract from their contribution as a valuable educational resource.

As a teacher within inclusive and segregated classrooms I knew I could teach the class, however more importantly, I realized the needs of all students in the class were better met when I could partner with an effective educational assistant. I also realized my lack of knowledge as to how to work effectively with an educational assistant at times limited the practice of some of the assistants with whom I worked. As a teacher in an alternate wilderness program for adolescent boys who were incarcerated due to their criminal behavior, I began to understand a common thread that wove their diverse individual histories together. Each of them had been unsuccessful in school and viewed their lifestyle as their only means of survival. I could not help but wonder what difference successful academic intervention may have made in their lives.

As an educational consultant I frequently participated in case conferences with teachers, administrators, school counselors, parents, and psychologists; without the involvement of educational assistants, to plan alternate ways to address the needs of students, even though it was the assistants who most often worked closely with the students to implement the programs we developed.

As a post secondary program co-ordinator preparing educational assistants to effectively support students and teachers in classrooms it is imperative for me to have a deep understanding of the practice of educational assistants. School board human resource personnel have clearly stated that positions for educational assistants to work with students with severe behavior disorders are challenging to fill and that there is a high

staff turn over in these positions. As a post secondary program we need to prepare more individuals to meet the demand for these positions in the field.

The reality of diminishing educational resources during a time of increasing tension between internal and external forces acting on the education system is forcing the stakeholders identified within this study to examine new ways of optimizing the contribution of educational assistants to the field of education. Gaining a deeper understanding of the nature of their practice from the perspective of the educational assistants themselves should help stakeholders to realize additional ways in which they can support the practice of teachers and educational assistants working together to effectively meet the needs of all students in the class.

Purposes of the Study

This study provides insights into the practice of six educational assistants in order to obtain a better understanding of, and information relevant to, their practice. The purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions of their practice held by educational assistants working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders. It was my intention for the six participants to share their job-related knowledge and experience with one another to jointly interpret the nature of their practice in the context of their interactions within their work environment. Van Manen (1998) suggested that "gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9) can provide opportunities for individuals to consider possibilities connected to one's practice that had not previously been considered. Another purpose of this study was to represent the perspectives of the educational assistants in their own words, for it is important that their voices be heard. Through this process, it may be

possible to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which educators can provide support to assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders. This study further provides information related to the issues of retention and recruitment, as well as the preparation and training needs of the educational assistants assigned to these positions.

Research Questions

The research question driving this study is: **How do educational assistants perceive their practice working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders?**

The questions forming the conceptual framework of this study are as follows:

- What kinds of support do educational assistants perceive they need in order to do their work effectively?
- What are the issues that educational assistants view as relevant to their work?
- What are the roles and responsibilities that educational assistants associate with their practice?

Significance and Need for the Study

Since 1995 Alberta Learning has consistently increased funding for students with severe behavior disorders in the school system. For example, there was a 54% increase in funding for students with severe behavior disorders in the 1999-2000 school year (Alberta Learning, 2000). As a result of the increased availability of funding, the number of positions available for educational assistants to work with students with severe behavior disorders has also increased. However, what educational assistants need in order to do their job effectively is generally not well understood. The purpose of this study is to

generate information from educational assistants related to the nature of their work within the context of inclusive classrooms. This study provides the opportunity for stakeholders to increase their understanding of what is required to optimize the contribution of educational assistants within school systems. In so doing, perhaps some of these stakeholders could find natural ways to collaborate and work together to provide greater support for educational assistants. The stakeholders who could benefit from the information generated by this study include the following:

- teachers who are working with educational assistants to meet the needs of students who have severe behavior disorders or who may be considering working with educational assistants;
- educational assistants who are working in the field for whom the information provided by their colleagues may resonate;
- principals of schools who currently employ educational assistants or who are considering incorporating educational assistants into their staffing profile;
- postsecondary education programs providing training for educational assistants or preparing teachers to work within inclusive classrooms;
- the ATA, which is monitoring the work of teachers in relation to classroom support staff while helping teachers to work effectively with educational assistants;
- Alberta Learning, which is constantly faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of students with severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms;

- school boards, who provide support to all staff within their employment and who may find the information helpful when identifying professional development needs; and
- unions supporting educational assistants in schools.

Assumptions

There are seven basic assumptions on which this study is based:

1. that the quality of education for students with severe behavior disorders can be enhanced through the work of an effective educational assistant;
2. that there are educational assistants working in positions with students who have severe behavior disorders who are demonstrating effective practice and that their school principals can identify these educational assistants within their staff group;
3. that when these effective educational assistants are asked about their practice, they will openly share their knowledge and experience;
4. that to learn about the nature of the practice of educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders, it is necessary to ask assistants who are working in the position;
5. that the role and responsibilities of educational assistants working within inclusive classrooms is complex and is not well understood and that this lack of understanding at times impedes the effectiveness of both the educational assistant and the teacher in the classroom;
6. that students with severe behavior disorders are some of the most challenging students to educate within inclusive classrooms, and educational assistants

who are effective in these situations are demonstrating pedagogically sound practice that could resonate with practitioners in other classroom settings; and

7. that educators would be willing to do more to support educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders if they understood what was required.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was delimited to six educational assistants working in regular classrooms with at least one student who is specially funded for severe behavior disorder. The study was delimited to individuals nominated by their school administrators as being effective in their practice with students who have severe behavior disorders. The study was also delimited to educational assistants working within two rural school divisions.

The study was limited to the extent that the participants were able to express an understanding of their knowledge and experience of their practice. The study was also limited by the extent that I was able to conduct the individual interviews, facilitate the focus group interviews, and interpret the information shared by the participants regarding their descriptions of the nature of their practice.

Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted as approved by the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education Research Ethics Board. Permission to conduct the study was also requested and granted by the superintendent or associate superintendent of each of the two participating school divisions and by each school principal who nominated a staff member. Prior to receiving informed written consent, I discussed with each participant the nature and purpose of the study and assured them that their participation was

voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I also stated that if the participant chose to withdraw from the study, all information shared by the participant to that point would be destroyed. I also verified that each participant would receive a copy of her own individual interview transcript, a copy of the focus group transcript, and a draft copy of the data and interpretation chapters, which I would edit based on discussion with the participant.

As a novice researcher I clearly understood and demonstrated my moral responsibility to be accountable to the participants whom I served within this study, which required me to protect their identity while listening to them and jointly making sense of their perspectives regarding the nature of their practice. Information that identifies the participants will be destroyed upon completion of the research, and the participants will not be identifiable in documents resulting from the research. All data were collected with the participants' consent, treated confidentially, and secured. Pseudonyms have been used for educational assistants participating in this study in order to protect their anonymity.

Outline of the Dissertation

Chapter Two contains a review of the literature, highlighting the areas that influence the historical development of the position of educational assistants in Alberta from the early 1970s to 2003, the challenges associated with the situational nature of their work and the influences of systemic educational policies on their practice. Chapter Three provides an overview of the research methodology, including description of the data collection and analysis. Chapter Four presents the major findings of the study, and Chapter Five presents my interpretation of the five themes that emerged from the data in

Chapter Four. Chapter Six includes an elaboration of the findings of the study, reflections on the research, and recommendations for the field and for further research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides an overview of the research and information from the field related to the phenomenon of this study. It also provides background information to support the theoretical framework of the study. The chapter is presented in four parts: an historical overview of the educational assistant position, inclusive education, the situated nature of practice, and the potential contribution of information from the new sciences to educational practice.

Historical Overview of the Position

A review of the literature outlining the historical development of the role of the educational assistant is presented here to provide the structural background necessary to understand the conditions that frame the position as it exists today.

Between 1954 and 1968 in Alberta, teachers began to obtain more professional education, and school boards began to pay higher salaries to teachers as their professional preparation increased. The economic impact of this action was that school boards began paying substantially more money to serve roughly the same number of students. To increase cost effectiveness, boards began assigning aides to schools to relieve teachers of nonteaching clerical tasks, such as renting books, issuing audiovisual equipment, and taking attendance. A few boards assigned twice as many students to teachers in classrooms with aides, feeling that the teacher could provide professional service to more children with another adult in the classroom. This action of increasing the student-adult ratio in the classroom rather than considering the student-teacher ratio eventually proved

to be ineffective. However, it was this action that led to the recurring concern among many teachers and administrators today about how educational assistants are assigned to classrooms.

In 1959 Condor School in Rocky Mountain School Division employed a clerk full time in an elementary classroom "under the direction of a very capable teacher" (Executive Secretary, 1959, p. 3). The Condor School staffing procedure prompted a request by the ATA that the Minister of Education review this action. The Minister of Education appointed a committee of three professional educators to investigate this matter: Dr. T. C. Byrne, Chief Superintendent of schools; Dr. H. T. Coutts, Dean of the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta; and the General Secretary of the ATA. The committee developed definitions related to four critical terms associated with the case:

teaching: contact with children that produces or is designed to produce changes in behavior.

teacher: a certificated person who initiates, organizes, directs, and performs the teaching process in a school or schools or is legally empowered to do so.

teacher's aide: one who may perform, in addition to clerical service, some phases of the teaching process under the direction of a qualified teacher.

school clerk: one who does not operate in the classroom continuously but who has a work station outside the classroom to carry out clerical duties assigned by a teacher or principal.

It is the challenges associated with attempting to define what *teaching* is and what it is not that continue to present problems for educators today.

The position statements of the ATA to its members have historically influenced the development of the practice of educational assistants within Alberta schools. The value of educational assistants in supporting student learning was recognized by the ATA in 1967, when the Annual Representative Assembly resolved in policy 58E/67 "that the Executive Council, in cooperation with other interested bodies, develop criteria governing the employment of instructional personnel who do not require teaching certificates" (ATA, 1967, p. 1). Within this same document, policy 62L/66 resolved that the ATA express its approval in principle of the institution of a new group of nonprofessionals to be known as *teacher assistants* and that "the Alberta Teachers' Association, in cooperation with the Department of Education, establish regulations to govern the qualifications, status and employment of such teacher assistants" (p. 2). More than 35 years have passed since this resolution was accepted, and provincial standards and guidelines related to the employment of paraprofessionals within these positions have yet to be developed.

In the early 1970s, during a period of general public dissatisfaction with taxes, the Alberta government tied educational costs to property taxes. At this same time the provincial government put "ceilings on educational expenses and also inaugurated a foundation payment structure discriminatory to boards employing teachers with more than the minimum professional education requirement of three years of teacher education" (ATA, 1973, p. 216). In an effort to keep costs from climbing, the use of voluntary personnel became an attractive alternative. In 1973, Black and Bunyan conducted an extensive study of staff differentiation in Calgary that was funded by the Alberta Department of Education. The study focused on a pilot project utilizing untrained

Grade 12 students to support elementary classroom teachers. This practice continues today, with Grade 12 students receiving course credit for their participation in work experience placements within classrooms.

During this same time period a federal government initiative was launched to respond to the national economic problem of mounting unemployment; it provided Local Initiatives Program (LIP) funding designed to relieve socioeconomic pressures. School boards devised ways to obtain LIP funds for special projects by utilizing volunteer and paid assistants to support programs for students with special needs. With high unemployment, voluntary work provided a chance for young people, housewives, and retired citizens to participate in meaningful, socially approved projects within their local schools. School boards began extending ways to utilize noncertificated voluntary and paid personnel in schools. As more duties began to be shared by noncertificated adults in the school, the definition of *teaching tasks* for which the teacher was responsible became more important.

In 1973 Chamchuk, a high school inspector, conducted an extensive study of issues related to certificated teachers and paraprofessionals working together in schools. The study, on behalf of the Alberta Department of Education, was designed to put forward a proposal for policy development related to the employment of educational paraprofessionals. The study included a review of the existing literature, visits to schools and board offices, interviews with representatives of the ATA, the Alberta School Trustee Association, the University of Alberta Faculty of Education, superintendents of school boards, and school staff. Chamchuk also corresponded with representatives of education departments in other provinces and the territories.

An important outcome of the Chamchuk (1973) report was that by this time the precedent for utilizing 'aides' in the classroom had been "firmly established," and "at least subjectively there was confirmation of their effectiveness" (p. ii). Chamchuk recommended that for the hiring of certificated and noncertificated personnel, "school boards allocate decisions of personnel employment while providing for appropriate and necessary involvement of school principals in the matters of quality and nature of services being offered by the school" (p. ii). However, recognizing the need for minimum standards of practice, Chamchuk recommended that the "Minister assume some responsibility in monitoring and regulating" the work of these educational paraprofessionals through the "establishment of a registry of both the nature of duties allocated to instructional aides and the names of specific persons utilized for such duties" (p. iii). Thirty years later, in 2003, there is a growing awareness among educators of the need for a credentialing system or other regulatory procedures to ensure that educational assistants have the skills and knowledge necessary to fulfill the requirements of their role.

The ambiguity associated with the term *teaching* was identified as a concern in Chamchuk's (1973) study. Representatives of the ATA accepted situations in which the 'aide' worked directly with children under the direction of the teacher, a behavior "that is readily associated with the common meaning of teaching" (p. 30). Chamchuk reported that the Annual Representative Assembly of the ATA wanted to develop a formal demarcation to classify two employment categories: teachers who possess a valid Alberta teaching certificate and "persons in the school not holding such certification" (p. 29), henceforth to be classified as teachers' aides. This same document reported that the prevalent perception of ATA members at the time was that "teachers' aides are expected

to emphasize the service-to-teacher component, rather than provide direct services to pupils" (p. 29). It is this commonly held perception of the assistant being in the classroom as a "teacher's assistant" in the 'service to teacher' role that is questioned by some educators today. They have suggested that the teacher does not need help teaching; rather, the student needs help learning. The study identified a reality that continues to be a concern for teachers, administrators, and educational assistants today, in that the "precise demarcation of task responsibility of teachers' aides has been found difficult to express in words" (p. 29).

Although the ATA adopted the resolution to accept the employment of educational assistants within classrooms in 1967, there has been a recurring theme among the position papers to the effect that employment of assistants within schools is not meant to reduce the number of certificated teachers or increase the class size, but to enhance the quality of instruction and "release the teacher for more contact time with colleagues, parents and students" (ATA, 1993, p. 4).

A position paper developed by the ATA (1973) identified two variables that are relevant today as contributing to the reduced "value" of assistants in the classroom. First, confusion existed among teachers and their assistants as to the role of the assistant in the classroom, particularly in the area of determining delegation of appropriate tasks. Second, it was noted that, generally, teachers had neither the training nor experience related to supervising and evaluating noncertificated staff in the classroom. Teachers are generally unprepared to assume this supervisory role.

In the early 1990s Alberta Education adopted Policy 1.6.1 in relation to the educational placement of students with special needs: which stated that "Regular

classrooms in neighborhood or local schools shall be the first placement options considered by school boards" (Alberta Education, 1995, p. 2). This policy was implemented during a time when the provincial government reduced spending in education. Although there has since been a reinvestment in education by the provincial government, providing educational resources at the level required to meet the needs of students is still difficult. During the past seven years there has been an increase in the number of students with diverse academic, social, emotional, and physical needs being educated within regular classrooms, resulting in an increased demand on the staff in these classrooms.

In the United States educational assistants have been employed by school districts in various roles as a resource in assisting general educators to address increases in student diversity for more than 40 years (Jones & Bender, 1993; Pickett, 1994). The number of staff in classroom support positions in the United States increased from an estimated 10 000 in the 1960s an estimated 500 000 in 1993 (Green & Barnes, 1989; U.S. Department of Education, 1993). The employment of assistants in schools has also been increasing in Alberta. Additional funding was made available to school boards to employ educational assistants in Alberta Education's three-year (1998-2001) plan through a commitment to increase the "number of teacher aides for grades 1 through 6 to increase classroom support and to enhance opportunities for students to achieve learning expectations" (Alberta Education, 1998, p. 11).

In March 1999 the Alberta government announced the Student Health Initiative in which Alberta Learning, Health, and Wellness, Children's Services, and Alberta Mental Health formed a collaborative partnership. The purpose of the Student Health Initiative

was to "enhance the provision of a range of integrated health and related support services for identified children with special needs registered in school programs and improve access to these services" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 2). Twenty-five Student Health Partnerships formed across Alberta within 17 regions and submitted service plans for the 1999-2000 school year. The two top priorities identified by all Student Health Partnerships were "emotional/behavioral supports and speech-language therapy" (p. 1).

Alberta Learning statistics from 1995 to 2000 that identified the number of students with severe behavioral/emotional disabilities reflect a continual increase in the number of students funded for their behavioral disorders, with a 54% increase during the 1999-2000 academic year (Alberta Learning, 2000).

In 2001 the Council on Alberta Teaching Standards, whose membership includes representatives from the Alberta School Boards Association, the ATA, the College of Alberta School Superintendents, Alberta Learning, teachers from across Alberta, and the public, prepared a document entitled *Principles to Guide Teachers Supported by Teacher Assistants* in response to a request to develop a set of principles that would guide teachers who have teacher assistants in their classrooms. The statement of belief provided by the document is that, "the quality of education a teacher provides to students can be enhanced through the supportive services of a teacher assistant" (p. 1). The document clearly articulated the responsibilities of the teacher as "the diagnosis of educational needs, the design of appropriate instruction and programs, the evaluation of students' progress, and the communication and reporting of students' progress to students, parents, and the board" (p. 1). This document also described the teacher as responsible for providing direction to and supervision of the teacher assistant.

An ATA (1993) position paper identified the following four areas as the teacher's responsibility: diagnosis of students' learning needs, prescription for those needs, implementation of the education program, and evaluation of the student's progress. As well, it was the position of the ATA that the classroom teacher should request the support of an assistant rather than be assigned the support and that "teachers' assistants are deployed most effectively when the classroom teacher rather than personnel external to the classroom" (p. 3) determine their duties. The position paper also acknowledged that part of the challenge of supporting teachers to work effectively with their assistants is the complexity of defining "the nature of the teaching task" (p. 3). In the past, teaching tasks had been defined as "all those professional tasks encountered by teachers in the course of their activities concerned with the instruction of pupils" (p. 2). The assignment of educational assistants to inclusive classrooms makes it possible for teachers to transfer many of these duties to the assistant, while overseeing the process. However, the sharing of classroom responsibilities can make role clarification ambiguous at times.

What began solely as clerical and housekeeping duties in the early 1970s has, since the implementation of inclusive education practices in Alberta in the early 1990s, expanded to include working with students with special needs under the direction of the classroom teacher, adapting learning materials and activities, documenting student's needs and progress, and providing clerical, technical, and supervisory support to teachers within inclusive classrooms.

Inclusive Education

Philosophical Base

The move toward inclusive education within Alberta was patterned after similar policies in the United States. The shift toward inclusive education began in the 1970s with the introduction of the concept of integration in that "the education system should educate handicapped children in the least restrictive environment and should guarantee every child adequate social adjustment and maximum school achievement" (Robichaud & Enns, 1980, p. 202). Educators during this time began to see a trend that once students were placed in segregated special education programs, they rarely returned to the regular classroom. As well, studies that focused on the academic outcomes of students placed in special classes compared to students with special needs who remained in regular classrooms showed little difference in academic achievement between the two groups (Bradfield, Brown, Kaplan, Rickert, & Stannard, 1973; Budoff & Gottlieb, 1976). At this same time several groups spearheaded by parent and professional advocacy groups in the United States influenced the integration of students with special needs within schools. A shift in public attitude toward normalization and deinstitutionalization resulted in educational placement alternatives, such as resource rooms and part-time special education class placements, as well as the enrolment of more students with moderate and severe disabilities in schools (Csapo & Goguen, 1980; Deno, 1973).

The CELDIC report, *One Million Children*, was the result of the work of the Commission on Emotional and Learning Disorders in Children in Canada, formed in 1966 in response to increasing demands by parents, teachers, and concerned citizens wanting to address the educational, social, and emotional needs of children in school. The

findings published by this report were that (a) every child has the right to the education required to realize his or her full potential, (b) the financing of education for all students is the responsibility of the educational authorities, and (c) students with exceptional learning needs should remain integrated with other students as long as possible (Roberts & Lazure, 1970). The report also recommended the elimination of existing categorical approaches to special education that gave labels to children in favor of instruction based on individual learning characteristics. In 1971 Hardy, McLeod, Minot, Perkins, and Quance released a report entitled *Standards for Education of Exceptional Children in Canada*, which recommended that teacher-training programs prepare teachers to understand the learning needs of students with exceptionalities. As a result, several Canadian universities developed and implemented courses and programs in special education for teachers (Andrews & Lupart, 2000).

During the 1980s educators implemented the concept of mainstreaming for students with special needs. During this time, school boards and provincial governments maintained the dual system of regular and special education, perpetuating the notion of categorical services for students with special needs (Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989). During the 1980s regular classroom teachers grew concerned about their increasing responsibility for serving students with special needs in their classrooms. They felt that they did not have the knowledge, experience, or training needed to meet the students' needs (Lupart, 1987; Winzer, 1985).

Inclusive education is based on a philosophy that "all children can learn and belong in the mainstream of school and community life. Diversity is valued; it is believed that diversity strengthens the class and offers all of its member greater opportunities for

learning" (Stainback & Stainback, 1996, p. 14). Advocates of inclusive education have proposed that restricting students with disabilities from full participation in general education fails to serve their needs, is stigmatizing, and deprives all students from the richness of diversity of academic and social learning. (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1992). York, Kronberg, and Doyle (1995) described three characteristics of inclusive learning environments as classrooms where members are provided with the necessary supports and accommodations in their regular school and community environments, so that

1. members of the same school community attend as neighbors and siblings,
2. members are assigned to classes based on their chronological age appropriateness,
3. members are provided with individualized curricular and instructional support. (p. 23)

A primary objective of full inclusion is to improve social competence in students with mild to severe disabilities and to change attitudes toward people with disabilities by "providing them with systematic instruction in the skills that are essential to their success in the social and environmental contexts in which they ultimately use these skills" (Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, p. 386). Supporters of full inclusion have argued that separating special and general education results in fragmentation, reduced efficiency, and additional cost for programs designed to meet the needs of students with disabilities on a continuum of placement options, and that student needs are best met through combined resources and supports within one classroom (Lipsky & Gartner, 1987; Sands, Kozleski, & French, 2000). Stainback and Stainback (1992) proposed, "An inclusive school educates all students in the mainstream. No students, including those with disabilities, are relegated to the fringes of the school by placement in segregated wings, trailers, or special classes"

(p. 34). Stainback and Stainback went on to suggest that, historically, special education classrooms have been 'dumping grounds' for students who were considered by general educators to be unteachable or undesirable.

Opponents of inclusion maintained that the cascade of services offered to students with disabilities provided options to meet their diverse academic and social needs within the least restrictive environment (Kauffman, 1990; MacMillan, Gresham, & Forness, 1996). Stainback and Stainback (1992) responded that the continuation of separate placements for students with disabilities enabled regular classroom teachers to avoid dealing with these students and limited the opportunities for schools to provide a more humanistic learning environment for all students.

Implementation

During the 1990s educators, parents, and policy makers in Alberta designed a different model for educating students with special needs. It was based on initiatives formulated in the United States, where Madeline Will (1986), the Assistant Secretary of Education, presented a paper, *Educating Children with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility*, that launched the Regular Education Initiative. This prompted the education system to restructure, to share the responsibility of educating students with mild to moderate disabilities by beginning to merge the general and special education streams into a unified education system (Lipsky & Gartner, 1989, 1997; Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987; Stainback et al., 1989). Will contended that separating general and special education is costly, ineffective, and promotes derogatory labeling.

In the early 1990s Alberta government implemented policy 1.6.1, which mandated that educating students with special needs in regular classrooms in

neighborhood or local schools shall be the first placement option considered by school boards, in consultation with students, parents/guardians, and school staff (Alberta Learning, 1999). This Alberta inclusive-education policy is based on a philosophy of equality, sharing, participation, and the worth and dignity of students who are recognized as having the right to take part in regular school activities in order to have a better chance of developing to their full potential.

The benefits for students with and without disabilities and their teachers within the United States have been documented by a number of authors (Nevin, Thousand, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Villa, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Thousand, Fox, Reid, Godek, Williams, & Fox, 1986).

Benefits to Students

When adequate support is provided to regular classrooms to include all students, students without disabilities develop more positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities in terms of respect and understanding. When this occurs students become more comfortable with both differences and similarities among their peers (Forest, 1988; Johnson & Johnson, 1984; Vandercook, Fleetham, Sinclair & Tetlie, 1988). O'Brien and Forest (1989) and O'Brien and O'Brien (1994) proposed additional benefits of inclusion are: providing students with authentic opportunities to care about others by acting consistently with one's values—for example, promoting equality, overcoming segregation, or defending a classmate who is treated unjustly. As well as, developing collaborative problem-solving skills by communicating, peer tutoring, and providing personal assistance to classmates. Further benefits include: learning directly about life's challenges, such as overcoming a fear of differences; dealing with difficult, violent, or

self-injurious behavior; and facing and supporting one another through the serious illness and sometimes the death of a classmate. Noddings (1992) maintained that the effort to build these skills in classrooms does not detract from academic preparation. Without respectful relationships within an environment of caring about people, ideas, and things, the achievement of academic and vocational goals becomes very limited.

It is believed that segregated placements alienate students, and when students are not exposed to diversity within classrooms, they experience an education that places little value on diversity, cooperation, and respect for others who are different (Johnson & Johnson, 1984; Karagiannis & Cartwright, 1990; Stainback & Stainback, 1988). Students with disabilities demonstrate that when appropriate educational experiences and supports are provided, they make greater academic gains, as well as learn about real life, practice communication, and improve their social skills in integrated settings rather than in segregated settings (Madden & Slavin, 1983). Wehman (1990) suggested that the more time that students with disabilities spend in inclusive settings, the better they do educationally, socially, and in the workplace and the community. In addition, segregated educational settings do not adequately prepare students for integrated lives in the community.

An inclusive philosophy proposes that, rather than maintaining two separate systems, educators should direct their efforts toward correcting the inadequacies of the general education classroom for the benefit of all students, including those with behavior disorders (Pfeiffer & Reddy, 1998).

Benefits to Teachers

Because inclusive education is a relatively new concept, it requires the coordination of teams and individuals who support one another (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Villa & Thousand, 1990) and collaborative consultation and teaming to plan and implement programs (Harris, 1990; Pugach & Johnson, 1990; Thousand & Villa, 1990). As a result, teachers in these supportive schools have the opportunity to develop their professional skills in an environment of collegiality and collaboration. As teachers learn new ways to support students with disabilities within their classrooms, their enhanced level of practice transfers to nondisabled students as well.

Underlying Teacher Concerns

The inclusion debate has been particularly polarized in relation to students with behavior disorders (Algozzine, Maheady, Sacca, O'Shea, & O'Shea, 1990; Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove, & Nelson, 1988). Students who typically exhibit inappropriate behavior and interpersonal relationship difficulties are not openly welcomed into general education classrooms. In fact, some educators believe that inexperienced teachers or teachers with limited classroom management skills contribute to the behavioral problems of these students (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995). Others believe that segregated educational placements for students with behavioral disorders have failed to help these students and have contributed to their 55% dropout rate and 22% law enforcement involvement rate while in school (Bassett, Jackson, Ferrell, Luckner, Hagerty, Bunsen & MacIsaac, 1996).

Some of the general education teachers' concerns about including students with behavior disorders in their classrooms have been identified by researchers. Teachers have

experienced these students displaying inappropriate classroom behavior, and studies documenting the achievement results of students with behavior disorders have shown that these students are deficient across most areas of academic functioning (Mastropieri, Jenkins, & Scruggs, 1985). Researchers have also reported that many students with behavior disorders also have learning disabilities (Fessler, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1991). Academic programs for students with behavior disorders generally require complex interventions in more than one area. These students often need to learn self-control skills, coping strategies, social skills, learning strategies, functional life skills, vocational skills, and social problem solving (Brooks & Sabatino, 1996; Knitzer, Steinberg, & Fleisch, 1990). Helping to master these skills that are required for students to become responsible citizens means taking time away from academic instruction.

For years, students with behavioral disorders have been the least accepted of students in any disability category by general classroom teachers (Haring, Stern, & Cruickshank, 1958; Johnson, 1987; Parish, Dyck, & Kappes, 1979). Researchers have also found that students with behavior disorders evoke the most negative attitudes from teachers (Coleman & Gilliam, 1983; Mooney & Algozzine, 1978; Walker, 1979).

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) reviewed 28 studies conducted between 1958 and 1995 to assess the stability over time of teacher attitudes to students with disabilities. Although the majority of the more than 10 000 teachers studied reported acceptance of the concepts of mainstreaming and inclusion, two thirds of the teachers indicated that they did not feel that they had sufficient time, skills, training, or resources needed to include students with special needs in their classrooms.

Inclusive education has resulted in significant change in the organization and culture of schools. Based on the evolution of the role of educational assistants, it is logical to expect that they will be included in the support of students with severe behavior disorders in this new educational context.

The Situated Nature of Practice

Wenger (1998) described *practice* as what individuals develop in order to be able to do their job and have a satisfying experience at work. He emphasized that it is the meaning generated by the experience that is important, and because meaning is located in the situation, practice is a process of constant negotiation of meaning. Capra (2002) claimed that events, actions, or things are not meaningful in themselves. We associate meaning by putting the event, action, or thing "into a particular context of concepts, values, beliefs, or circumstances" (p. 84). In this way we come to understand the meaning of one thing in relation to other things within the immediate environment or to its history or its potential future.

Wenger (1998) proposed that within the process of one's practice, tasks are completed, relationships are worked out, methods are invented, situations are interpreted, artifacts are produced, and conflicts are resolved. As a result, practice involves a complex process of socially negotiated participation that "combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging involving the whole person" (p. 56). This process of negotiation includes both interpretation and action through our connections with one another within the situation and requires negotiation because individuals bring their personal histories of participation to their practice. Lave (1993) added that people working in the same situation know different things and speak with different interests and with experience

from different social locations. Eisner (1991) acknowledged the importance of valuing the "historical antecedents of a context" (p. 36) in that, in working with people, it provides a framework for interpreting the meaning of actions, events, and things. Zachary (2000) supports this idea by suggesting that we react to the expectations of the context, based on our associated, previous experience and historical knowledge. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) suggested a need to look at people and their settings as a whole in relation to their past and present situations if we are to understand the experience of their daily struggles.

Working within inclusive classrooms, teachers and assistants constantly share working conditions and experience common dilemmas in which meanings and engagement need to be negotiated through active participation. Differences of world view and perspective are expected whenever people work together. Teachers and educational assistants need to find ways to honor their different responses to situations if they are to share their understanding of each other's experiences within the classroom context and if they are to work together to actualize learning outcomes for their students. As well, the meaning of the classroom activities in which teachers and assistants are mutually engaged is developed through the context, and the context is constantly changing. The combination of these factors means that classroom staff need opportunities to negotiate what is relevant, how to interpret ambiguous situations, what is worth knowing and doing, what to do when the solution is not obvious, and what they value within the situation (Lave, 1993). It is this situated nature of the practice of educational assistants within inclusive classrooms, especially those working with students with severe behavior disorders, that requires classroom staff to schedule planning time together so they can

negotiate the meaning of their practice within the context of the classroom. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) found that a task of shared practice is to establish a baseline of common sense by classroom staff, making explicit their knowledge and experience within the context of the learning situation.

Cole and Cole (1989) pointed out that the word *context* comes from the Latin derivative *contexere,* meaning 'to weave together or to join together.' Zachary (2000) defines the term context as the "circumstances, conditions, and contributing forces that affect how we connect and interact with one another" (p. 29). Blair and Caine (1995) referred to the context of a situation as the organizational environment in which an event takes place. It is part of the situation, not external to it, and as a result the situation cannot be separated from the experience itself. The practice of educational assistants is complex and must be understood by teachers in relation to both the overall educational needs of the students and the practical needs of the teacher, within the context of the classroom setting.

The ATA (2000), in the monograph *Teachers and Teachers' Assistants: Roles and Responsibilities*, has provided the following guidelines to help teachers understand their role in relation to educational assistants. The supervising teacher has responsibility in three areas: diagnosing student learning needs, evaluating student progress and programs, and prescribing educational programming. This document does not include the implementation statement included in previous documents, but states that under the direction of the teacher, the educational assistant may "work directly with students to deliver activities that reinforce and advance the education program" (p. 1). The actual responsibilities that are assigned to the educational assistant vary depending on the

assistant's training and experience, the needs of the student, the requirements of the teacher, and the resources that are available within the school and the school district.

Jantsch (1980) proposed that to actualize the potential contribution of individuals within any given situation, we must sometimes let go of existing structures within our organizations and be willing to consider new ways of working together within new structures. It seems that the time is right to let go of our traditional thinking of education assistants in relation to the authority of the classroom teacher and to begin thinking of optimizing the potential of classroom staff working as teams to meet the needs of all students in the classroom.

The New Sciences and Educational Practice

Existing Mechanistic Paradigm

Barker (1992) described *paradigms* as deeply held beliefs that shape our view of the world and suggested that paradigms carry our assumptions and are embedded with our values. Costa and Liebmann (1997) discussed the strong influence of paradigms on our thinking, in that these deep-seated, tacitly held models place a "hold on our perception of reality so deep that it is hard to imagine any other way of looking at the event, situation, or content" (p. 32). In education the prevailing paradigm used to organize and structure classrooms has been based on a metaphor of viewing classrooms as being highly mechanistic in nature. This mechanistic paradigm of hierarchical relationships was developed in the 17th century by Isaac Newton to illustrate a view of the world as a giant cosmic machine composed of elementary building blocks, within which the actions of any part of the machine were governed by immutable laws to create a controllable universe. According to this model, everything that happens has a definite

cause, as a result of a definite effect, and the future of any part of the system could be predicted with certainty if its state at any time was known in detail (Capra, 1982).

This 17th-century Newtonian view influenced educational practice by separating the system into parts. The belief holds that we can separate classroom activities and the actions of staff and students into parts isolated from the context, and that through complex planning we can create predictable events and fix anything through the analysis of the fundamental parts. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) described how the mechanistic perspective entices us to believe that we can control a colleague's behavior by identifying and isolating the undesirable part, then sending the individual to an in-service training session. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers noted that we continue to be surprised when these interventions do not result in the changes we expected. Caine and Caine (1997a) discussed how we lose sight of our purpose when we focus on "fixing or altering the structure" (p. 37). This concept of fixing or repairing defects promotes the belief that "causes and effects can be clearly identified, separated, measured, and related to each other . . . in direct and proportionate ways and that outcomes can be predicted and controlled" (p. 37), which results in a perception of linear cause-effect relationships. Linearity implies that there is a relative correlation between the size of the input and the size of the change; for example, a small input will have a small effect. Viewing classrooms from this mechanistic perspective, we expect "a state of orderly relations between clearly defined parts that have some determinate order. These mechanical relations are usually thought of as routinized, efficient, reliable, and predictable" (Morgan, 1997, p. 13), and we have come to view classrooms in this manner. However, in reality, classrooms are dynamic, open learning environments; the outcomes of what

actually goes on in them are much more unpredictable than we originally thought, and the roles of individuals within these environments are ambiguous at times. In education we have frequently confused order with control.

Goerner (1994) observed that in the past calculus was used as a predominant tool to support mechanistic science. This model is based on assumptions that change is a smooth, continuous process and that any problem can be broken down—approximated to precision—by simple lines and curves. Calculus is used effectively to represent a set of independent elements, all changing in isolation from one another, and as a result they exhibit smooth continuous change. However, smooth change is often embedded in larger dynamic systems. These analytic techniques work for some problems and some systems given a precise enough model and initial conditions, but for the most part they are inadequate for the vast majority of problems in the world. The difficulty with calculus-solvable systems on which mechanistic science is built is that they lead us to believe that we can "isolate causes, predict precisely, reduce to independent elements and control change" (p. 14). Goerner pointed out that prediction is possible for limited time periods and under certain conditions, but not in the general case.

The mechanistic paradigm is also built on the assumption that a small change in the system will affect the system in predictable and traceable ways. In most systems small effects vary depending on the context. What calculus cannot address are problems found in nonlinear, interdependent systems. Merry (1995) described the concept of nonlinearity in reference to proportionality: It expresses a disproportion between cause and effect; in nonlinear systems input is not proportional to output; small causes may lead to large effects, and large causes may have small effects.

Research in the new sciences proposes a new world view that spans a number of disciplines has discovered that

> systems can be both completely determined and completely unpredictable; what looks random often has hidden structure; the structure of things often does not get simpler as you break it down; infinitesimal causes can have a massive effect; complex systems often have simple solutions; and simple equations often produce very complex results. (Goerner, 1994, p. 16)

Wholeness Rather Than Separate Parts

The machine metaphor was useful as a model to promote manufacturing and organizational advances until the early 1900s, when research in quantum physics, complexity theory, and social ecology redefined the universe as a dynamic, indivisible whole whose parts are essentially interrelated (Capra, 1982). Capra (1996) noted that in the 1930s organismic biologists, Gestalt psychologists, and ecologists who were studying living systems found commonality in terms of connectedness, relationships, and context that were supported by discoveries in quantum physics.

This information from the new sciences provides a new lens for viewing the world. A fundamental difference between the old and the new paradigm is that the new paradigm is grounded in a sense of wholeness rather than in fragmentation. Kauffman (1995) noted that the whole has certain properties and characteristics that simply are not evident when the parts are treated separately. Capra (1982) proposed that although we can discern individual parts in any system, the nature of the whole is always different from the mere sum of its parts. He affirmed that scientists have shown that analysis of subatomic particles has no meaning as isolated entities, but can be understood only as interconnections between various processes of observation and measurement. Capra commented that nature does not provide isolated basic building blocks, but rather appears

as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of a unified whole. According to Capra, quantum theory never end up with things; it always deals with interconnections.

Complexity is a term derived from the Latin root meaning 'to entwine,' and the influence of the new sciences on classrooms is based on the notion that individuals within the classroom interact dynamically with their environment, influencing the context of the classroom and in turn being influenced by the classroom context. Complex systems do not exist in isolation but rather are connected to other systems through a dense web of relationships. Complexity within this study refers to the concept of highly interrelated, not complicated. Liebmann (1997) proposed that a major challenge for educators in the 21st century will be to see, and to benefit from, the web of connections.

Complex Adaptive Systems

Information from the new sciences can contribute to our understanding of the fundamental processes and characteristics of inclusive classrooms in terms of complex, nonlinear networks. The new sciences are highly interdisciplinary and include biologists, physicists, anthropologists, economists, chemists, management theorists, and others seeking an understanding of fundamental questions about living systems. The new sciences study complex adaptive systems in terms of their patterns of relationships, their sustainability, their self-organization, and the emergence of outcomes (Zimmerman, Lindberg, & Plsek, 2001). Lewin and Regine (2001) refer to complex adaptive systems as "composed of a diversity of agents that interact with each other, mutually affect each other and in so doing create novel behavior for the system as a whole" (p. 6).

Zimmerman et al. (2001) pointed to the significance of each word: *Complex* refers to the diversity of a number of connections among a variety of elements. *Adaptive* suggests the capacity to change and to learn from experience. A *system* refers to the connections among agents. Zimmerman et al. proposed that complex adaptive systems are made up of dense patterns of relationships among interdependent components in which causality is mutual. Each cause is also an effect, and every effect is also a cause. Fullan (1999) suggested that this link between cause and effect within complex adaptive systems is difficult to trace and that "change unfolds in nonlinear ways, paradoxes and contradictions abound, and that creative solutions arise out of interaction under conditions of uncertainty, diversity, and instability" (p. 4). For complex adaptive systems to sustain themselves, they require diversity, which is both a source of novelty and a source of information (Capra, 1996; Fullan, 2001; Stacey, 1996; Zimmerman et al., 2001). Lewin and Regine (2001) found that leaders of successful companies viewed diversity as a key source of sustainability.

During the industrial era, when factories served as social models for schools, the mechanistic model of education was efficient for meeting the needs of students in classrooms. During this time notions of order, regularity, predictability, and control were readily accepted; and it was felt that uncertainty, disorder, and irregularity were based in faulty methods and needed to be viewed with suspicion.

Capra (1996), Jantsch (1980), Kauffman (1995), and Merry (1995) affirmed that it is natural for individuals to seek certainty, order, regularity, predictability, and some degree of stability in their work and daily lives. Order and regularity fulfill the basic human need for safety and security. Caine and Caine (1997a) suggested that beliefs

associated with the need for constancy, predictability, and stability are deeply ingrained in our personal value systems and in those of many organizations, including educational institutions. The Western world has bought into the notion that stability, predictability, and planned change are signs of a healthy organization and has learned to fear the opposite (Caine & Caine, 1997a). The belief behind this value system in relation to education is that teachers are in charge of classrooms and that teachers can tightly control the practice of classroom support staff and the events that occur within classrooms. The limitation of this model is that classrooms are complex units, and the interactions of students and staff within the milieu of curriculum learning activities cannot be as tightly controlled as the model implies. Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers (1996) observed that the new sciences have taught us that we cannot plan projects or learning experiences backwards from the future by visualizing every detail in advance. Educators who have developed strategic plans know that actual strategies when implemented are not as predictable as the plan depicts. Individual program plans for students in the classroom require continual revision to meet the students' needs, and the revisions require consultation by those involved with the development and implementation of the plan which includes input from the educational assistant.

A concern commonly expressed by educators in the field is that educational funding sources have not been able to keep pace with the identified needs of students in classrooms. However, when educational assistants are assigned to classrooms, classroom teams are often not able to achieve their full capacity because classroom personnel continue to organize themselves around the traditional "machine" model, working as separate entities within the classroom. The machine metaphor promotes the concept that

the parts of a classroom have specific functions and purposes, as do parts of a machine. This concept has been translated into the development of specific job descriptions in education, with associated specific responsibilities that do not take into consideration the classroom context. The challenge to education is to move beyond the mass acceptance of the machine metaphor as a dominant view that perceives schools as well-oiled machines in which unpredictability or uncertainty are viewed as malfunctions needing to be 'fixed'. Educators can accept and learn from unpredictability and realize what is needed to be successful in these situations; for example, classroom staff need scheduled time to deal with unexpected outcomes and plan together.

Change in education is constant and unpredictable. Stacey (1996) observed that the task of 21st-century administrators is to cope with unpredictability and use it to the organization's advantage as a source of novelty and creativity rather than trying to limit or control change. Blair and Caine (1995) stated that "education has been mired for too long in a mechanized practice that fragments our world and directs us away from an integrated reality" (p. 20). Using the contributions from the new sciences we can use a metaphor associated with life and living systems rather than machines and mechanical systems to reframe our understandings of the complexity of classroom relationships (Zimmerman et al., 2001). For example, information from biological research studying the crossover of genetic material to create sustainability is much more focussed on the patterns of interrelationships and the context, than on the individual agents in isolation. In other words, how the parts are connected is more critical than what the parts are (O'Connor & McDermott, 1997).

The challenges that face teachers who are working with educational assistants within inclusive classrooms often stem from an underlying belief held by the teacher that he/she must be involved in the parts of the students' programs that he/she is seeking to influence. Wheatley (1992) commented that we often believe that what holds the classroom together are the "point to point connections among separate things that must be laboriously woven together by us" (p. 110). The diversity of students' needs within inclusive classrooms requires teachers to keep track of more pieces and more connections, which eventually become unmanageable for one person. This is when teachers must respect the interdependent relationship of the classroom team. Jantsch (1980) suggested that we need to move beyond our search for order to an appreciation of "dynamic interconnectedness" (p. 196). Stacey (2000) proposed that organizations such as schools need to start thinking of their structure in terms of the processes with which people engage when relating to and interacting with one another over time. This places communication at the core. As Caine and Caine (1997a) so clearly stated, "We keep focusing on fixing or altering the structure when we really need to understand what keeps the structure in place" (p. 37).

Chapter Summary

The literature associated with this study traced the historical development of the roles of educational assistants from straightforward clerical support positions in the early 1970s to the current role of providing support to both the teachers and the students in today's classrooms. This overview illustrates how the responsibilities of the position have evolved in relation to changes in the context of classrooms. The implementation of inclusive education by Alberta Learning in the early 1990s, which placed most students

with special needs in regular classrooms, significantly impacted the practice of educational assistants in schools. Since this time regular classroom teachers have been faced with a growing diversity of student needs within their class grouping and require the support of an effective educational assistant to better meet the students' needs. However, the meaning of classroom practice cannot be predicted in advance and is situated in the context in which it occurs. This reality requires the teacher and the educational assistant to build a working relationship in order to interpret their practice within the context of the classroom.

Literature from the new sciences has provided educators with a new lens through which to view classrooms as living systems in which events unfold that are at times unpredictable, nonlinear, and highly interrelated. An ecological perspective of classroom practice recognizes the importance of working relationships and the need for joint planning time for teachers and assistants to share their interpretations and understandings of classroom events and situations. This information from the new sciences has the potential to change the way teachers and educational assistants work together to better meet the needs of all students.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY OF THE RESEARCH

In this chapter the research methodology is discussed in terms of the data collection process, research timetable, data analysis procedures, role of the researcher, and trustworthiness of the findings.

This research can be categorized as a qualitative study because it seeks to understand the little-known phenomenon of classroom practice from the perspective of the participants involved in the study (Merriam, 2001). The research question driving this study was, *How do educational assistants perceive their practice working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders?* In an effort to understand the participants' practice, the study was designed to use individual and focus group interviews to generate information from the participants related to the following areas: the kinds of support they require to do their job effectively, the issues they associate with their work, their work-related needs and expectations, and the roles and responsibilities they associate with their practice.

Conducted as an exploratory, interpretive inquiry, the design is emic, inductive, emergent, and descriptive. In the early 1950s Pike (1954) coined the term *emic* within anthropological studies to distinguish between classifications developed by the people in the study and classifications determined by the researchers. This study is emic in nature because it seeks to understand the phenomenon of the study from the perspective of the participants (Merriam, 2001). The study is inductive in that representations were formed from the particular into categories and themes as different pieces of data were interconnected and grouped together (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The emergent nature of

the study was evidenced by its flexible conceptual framework, which was modified in response to changing conditions of the study as they became apparent. The interpretation of the data within this study is "richly descriptive," containing direct quotations from the participants as they described their perceptions of their practice (Merriam, 2001, p. 8).

Selection of Participants

The six participants for this study were nominated by their school principals as educational assistants who were effective in their work with students with severe behavior disorders. The participants were unknown to me at the start of the study. Two rural school districts were selected to provide participants for the study based on their proximity to one another. This criterion was established to enable participants to attend focus group sessions without undue hardship related to traveling. A letter was sent to the superintendent of each school district requesting permission to conduct the research study within their school division (see Appendix A). The school superintendents were asked to identify schools within their division where educational assistants were assigned to inclusive classrooms with students who had severe behavior disorders. I then began randomly contacting principals within the designated schools by phone, followed by a letter asking for permission to conduct research with their staff and asking them to nominate an educational assistant from their staff who they felt was effective in his or her work with students with severe behavior disorders (see Appendix C). In May of 2001 I telephoned prospective participants from the nominations and selected the first three individuals, who agreed to meet with me to discuss their potential involvement in the study. I met with each participant to provide an overview of the research study and to make explicit the nature of their involvement. Informed, written consent was obtained

from each participant prior to the first interview (see Appendix D). In May and June of 2001 the first three individual interviews were conducted. This same process was then repeated in October and November of 2001 with three additional participants.

Demographics of the Participants

The six participants in this study were employed in full-time educational assistant positions within two rural school divisions. Their specific assignment of working with students who have severe behavior disorders varied from 50% to 100% of their day. Their years of experience in working as educational assistants ranged from three to 14 years, with a combined total of 59 years for the group. Their years of experience in working with students with severe behavior disorders within primary, elementary, and junior high school segregated or inclusive classrooms ranged from one to 14 years. All participants were female and had children of their own, and all felt that their parenting skills were a beneficial influence on their work with students with severe behavior disorders. All six participants had training related to supporting students with special needs in the classroom through either postsecondary course work or specialized professional in-service learning

Research Timetable

Research for this study proceeded on the following schedule:

- March 2001 — Contacted superintendents of two rural school boards by telephone and sent follow-up letters (see Appendices A and B).
- April 2001 — Superintendents approved research study and provided a list of schools employing educational assistants to work with students

with severe behavior disorders. Contacted principals to approve the research study and to nominate an assistant (see Appendix C).

- May 2001 — Contacted three potential participants; met to discuss their potential involvement in the study, and obtained consent (see Appendix D). Provided participants with a sample of the individual and focus group interview questions (see Appendices E and F).
- May/June 2001 — Conducted three individual interviews.
- July 2001 — Transcribed interview tapes and returned transcript of interview to each participant for verification of the information. Began analysis of data.
- Oct/Nov 2001 — Conducted remaining three individual interviews.
- Dec. 2001 — Returned transcripts of the individual interviews to each participant for verification of the information.
- Jan. 2002 — Analyzed combined individual interview data.
- Feb. 2002 — Compiled overview of emerging categories; sent this and revised focus group questions to participants (see Appendices H and I).
- March 2002 — Conducted first focus group interview. Sent transcripts of interview to participants for verification of the information. Combined analysis of focus group data and individual interview data. Revised interview questions (see Appendices J and K).
- April 2002 — Conducted second focus group interview. Sent transcripts of the interview to participants for verification of the information.

Integrated data from the second focus group into existing analysis of material.

- Feb. 2003 — Shared a draft copy of interpretation of the data with study participants to verify that it accurately represented their perspectives of the phenomenon of the study (see Appendix L).

Data Collection

Data for this study were gathered through semistructured individual and focus group interviews using open-ended, in-depth questions. Individual and focus group interviews were used because I strongly believe that educational assistants in the field carry a vast amount of knowledge and experience in regard to their practice that needs to be accessed and I gave the participants the opportunity to talk about what mattered to them as practitioners. I felt both types of interview were necessary to provide the richness of a diverse source of data for this study. Michell (1999) observed, "Focus groups can facilitate the exploration of mutual experiences and identities" (p. 36), whereas individual interviews allow participants an opportunity to have an in-depth exploration of their experiences related to their practice. Michell discussed the importance of combining the two approaches in that "layers of meaning and explanation" (p. 41) can be revealed by some participants during the individual interviews that may have been hidden within the focus group.

It was important for me to take the necessary time throughout this study to gather the interview data in a respectful manner, to allow participants time to provide feedback related to the transcripts of the interviews, and to revisit concepts that needed to be discussed at a deeper level. Data were collected over a period of 11 months, beginning in

the spring of the school year and continuing through the spring of the following year. I intentionally collected data over 11 months in order to enable participants to meet at times when they were available and to enable me to provide the participants with information such as transcripts of interviews and analysis of the data as it developed within the study.

The research design maintained the flexibility needed to accommodate changes to the individual and focus group questions as the data were gathered and analyzed.

Individual Interviews

A semistructured, audiotaped individual interview was conducted with each participant. This first interview was intended to build rapport with each participant and to "establish the context of the participant's experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 11). A list of potential questions was provided to each participant prior to the interview, and the questions were used only as a guide to access the broad range of experiences held by each participant. A conversation developed as each participant described her practice and reflected on its meaning in relation to her experiences. Each session began with my asking, "Tell me what it is like to be an educational assistant in your classroom." The remaining questions from the interview guide then built upon the participant's response to this opening question. Each individual interview was potentially scheduled for one-and-one-half hours, but several lasted longer because of the participant's desire to share the information. After each individual interview the transcript of the audiotape was returned to the participant for verification of its accuracy and to confirm that the participant was comfortable sharing the information.

Canning (1992) highlighted the importance of involving individuals who are in a specific position when seeking to understand the specific position: "If we are to actually improve schools and educational practice, we will need to explore the interpretations those in the enterprise hold of themselves . . . by asking those who experience some phenomenon of interest to tell it in their own words" (p. 61). Sanford (1982) remarked that interviews provide respondents "a chance to say things for which there had not previously been an appropriate audience. They can put into words some ideas and thoughts that had been only vaguely formulated" (p. 897). Through the dialogue during the interviews, the participants began to make explicit their tacit knowledge related to their practice, indicating that they enjoyed the opportunity to finally talk about issues they had thought about many times in the past.

At the conclusion of the individual interviews I realized that the participants had provided an in-depth overview of their experience. At this point I felt that it was necessary to ask the participants to share their mutual understanding of their practice using a focus group.

Focus Group Interviews

Morgan (1998) referred to the focus group interview as a research method used in qualitative studies to involve a "purposive sample" of participants (p. 30). The aim is to generate data through group discussion on a topic predetermined by the researcher. The focus group interviews were intended to generate a broad range of experiences and opinions that complemented the more personal, in-depth data previously gathered during the initial individual interviews. Categories had emerged from the data shared by participants in the individual interviews in relation to the research question, and this

information was used to guide some of the group discussion. The focus group was used to 'cast a broader net' in order to gather information from participants in the field. They were asked to share information from the context of their own experience in relation to the experiences of other group members in an attempt to develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of their practice. The structure of the questions that guided group discussion remained open and flexible to enable the group to expand on new information as it developed within the discussion.

Two focus group interviews were conducted with all participants in attendance. The sessions were audiotaped, and I provided a written summary of participants' comments on two flipcharts as a visual record of information shared. Krueger (1998) confirmed, "The flip chart allows participants to observe what is being recorded and, if necessary, to modify, revise, or verify those comments" (p. 56) as the focus group session evolves. My role throughout the two focus group sessions was primarily to facilitate the process. I struggled to remain as neutral as possible in order to build trust among group members; to identify comments that required clarification, elaboration, or verification; to ensure that all members had an opportunity to contribute; to keep the group moving through the content in a timely manner; and to structure the process in order to ensure that the resources were available to initiate discussion and to focus dialogue on specific areas of inquiry.

Marshall and Rossman (1995) commented, "Focus groups provide a wide variety of information across a larger number of participants" (p. 81). The focus group session yielded a different type of data as participants built on one another's ideas to make sense of their practice. Having the opportunity to share their ideas and experiences with 'like

others' who understood the context of the conversation enabled the participants to make explicit some of their tacit knowledge related to their practice. Hearing others describe situations to which the participants could relate seemed to make the meaning and value of several aspects of their practice more apparent than had been the case during the individual interviews. The focus group discussion provided an opportunity for information to surface, and deep discussion developed as participants' comments linked to one another. Discussion included surfacing issues, confirming and clarifying ideas, as well as proposing possible solutions to identified issues.

Data Analysis

The process of seeking to understand and honor what the participants were saying in relation to their practice was ongoing throughout the study. Analysis of the data began as I transcribed the audiotapes from the first individual interview and continued throughout the data collection and interpretation process. After each interview a print copy of the interview transcript was returned to each participant for verification of the content of the information. After each interview I began open-coding the data by making marginal notes on the interview transcripts, and common patterns of responses began to connect to one another. These patterns formed into nine categories related to the responses from more than one participant that were gathered from the data during the individual interviews.

To prepare for the first focus group session, I provided each participant in advance with a copy of the initial analysis of the individual interview data listing the nine categories and presenting anonymous responses that had been made by two or more participants during the individual interviews. I considered it important for the study

participants to have an opportunity to confirm the validity of their ideas, concerns, and needs through the natural verification of their comments made in relation to one another. It was my intention for participants to see how the focus group questions linked to the data and the study as a whole. The additional focus group questions that I had developed during the analysis phase were also provided (see Appendix H). I also wanted the participants to see how their individual responses were connecting to the overall picture that was beginning to form. It was my intention that the participants see the value of the information they had provided from their background experience and knowledge. I wanted to confirm that it was their individual input that was creating the content of the study. I encouraged participants to bring additional questions, insights, concerns, and comments to share within the focus group session.

To begin the first focus group session, the participants introduced themselves to one another and provided an overview of their current position within the context of the classroom and school in which they were working. I shared a brief overview of the research process to date and reviewed the expectations of the study. I then asked the group if they had questions, concerns, or insights that they would like to share. The discussion began. Because of the depth of knowledge and experience of the participants and their passion for their work, I interjected only to pose a question or to ask for clarification, elaboration, or verification of a comment made by a participant. The group members carried the conversation, making statements, posing questions to one another, struggling to make their tacit knowledge explicit in order to make sense of their own practice in relation to one another.

The first focus group session was audiotaped, and I recorded participants' comments on flipcharts. This visual presentation of paraphrased comments provided a reference point for clarification, verification, or elaboration of initially ambiguous comments made by participants to which we could return at an appropriate time without having to interrupt the flow of the group conversation. At the close of this half-day focus group session, I provided a brief summary of what had been discussed during the session, at which time participants clarified some of the points previously made. I then confirmed that I would meet with the participants again but was not sure if it would be through individual interviews or another focus group. The group members suggested that if we were to schedule another focus group, it should be a full-day session.

The transcript of the first focus group interview was provided to the participants to confirm the accuracy of the information and to confirm the participants' comfort with the information shared. After the tapes were transcribed, it was clear that another focus group was needed to elaborate and confirm data from the first focus group. Concepts were beginning to take shape that required group dialogue.

I continued coding the participants' responses by making notes on the margins of the focus group transcript. A second analysis of the data produced 11 additional categories that were connected to the nine categories originally identified within the individual interview data. From these 20 categories I developed a new set of focus group questions to guide our discussion during the second session (see Appendix K). Prior to the second focus group session, the participants were provided with a copy of the transcript of the first focus group session and the list of potential questions to guide our conversation during the second session. I encouraged participants to come prepared to

add their additional comments, questions, and insights based on their understanding of their practice.

For this second session I prepared flipchart papers containing headings related to the categories that had formed to date from the data that I felt needed elaboration and posted these charts about the room to guide our discussion. I introduced the second session with a brief overview of the progress of the study to date, reinforcing the intention of the research and highlighting some of the natural connections that appeared to be forming in the data from my perspective. I asked the participants for their expectations of the day and outlined some of my expectations for the session. I had asked the participants to bring their additional questions, concerns, and insights; this was where the discussion began. We started early in the morning, worked through lunch, and finished late in the afternoon. It was the participants' energy for the topic that carried the conversation. Prior to closing the session, I summarized the material that we had developed, and I shared with the group the next phases of the research process, confirming that the transcript of this session would be provided to each of them. I also promised that when a draft of my interpretation of the data was available, it would be shared with each of them to confirm its accuracy.

Upon completion of my transcription of the audiotapes of the second focus group session, I continued to use notes written in the margins throughout the transcript to identify common response patterns and categories. As I revisited the data documented in the transcripts, a further analysis of the pattern codes and developing categories formed by the participants' responses revealed four common areas linked to the participants' perceptions of their practice. This deeper understanding of the data created a shift in my

analysis. Until this point I had been able to see the connections among the patterns of responses only in relation to the categories that were forming. As I began to understand the connections between the participants' individual and collective responses in relation to four content areas, a framework to connect the data began to form. The four areas connected to the educational assistants in terms of their relation to (a) the teachers with whom they work, (b) the student with severe behavior disorders to whom they are assigned, (c) the other students in the class, and (d) the school community. I then applied the three questions that had developed from the conceptual framework of the study to further connect the data. The three questions were, (a) What roles and responsibilities do educational assistants associate with their practice? (b) what are the issues educational assistants view as relevant to their work? and (c) what kinds of support to educational assistants perceive they need in order to do their job effectively?

As I continued to rework the data, I came to realize that the participants were not describing *issues* in the field related to their practice; rather, they were describing their *needs* in relation to the field. As a result of this understanding I began to reconsider the data in relation to the two foundational questions that formed the conceptual framework of the study: (a) What do the participating educational assistants need in order to be effective in their practice? and (b) what roles and responsibilities do participating educational assistants associate with their practice? Within the framework of these two questions, patterns of common responses within the categories connected to create five themes for the study.

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, the diversity of perspectives held by the participants of their practice gradually appeared. However, as their

differences became evident, so did their commonalities. The data included in this thesis have been confirmed by all study participants as authentically verifying their perspectives of their position and their needs in relation to their work.

Role of the Researcher

Within this study it was necessary for me to address the potential influence of my presence on the words and actions of the participants in the individual and focus group interviews. Rossman and Rallis (1998) referred to this influence as *research reflexivity* and described it as an interactive, "reciprocal reaction between the researcher and the participants" of the study (p. 39). The term reflexivity is borrowed from the Latin word *reflectere,* meaning 'directed back upon the mind' (*Chambers*, 2000). Rossman and Rallis (1998) suggest that reflexivity occurs during the interview when the researcher begins to associate meaning with the actions or words of the participants and begins to "generate constructs" that can form into questions, comments, or probes to direct or interpret the interview information from the researcher's background knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of the study (p. 39). Rossman and Rallis (1998) also referred to a second influence of reflexivity as demonstrated in the way that the participants of the study react to the researcher by modifying their words and actions according to the relationship that they have established.

I realized throughout the study the importance of my being conscious of my intention, in that as Kellor and Golley (2000) suggest, when we recognize things in the world it is from a "temporal, or subjective perspective" (p. 21). My initial interests and purposes in this study influenced the conception of the perceived phenomenon of the study, the formation of the research question, the manner in which the participants were

selected, the choice of methodology, and the interpretation of the data. My stance throughout the study was that of detachment, described by Arrien (1993) as "the capacity to care deeply from an objective place" (p. 111). My sensitivity to the influence of reflexivity within this study was demonstrated throughout the research process in the following ways:

- In the design phase of the research proposal, I consciously struggled to develop a conceptual framework that could provide an extensive opportunity for participant input into the study and allowed for modification of the process when necessary.
- During the phase of selecting the research participants, I explicitly identified my current position in the field, clearly stated the intent of the research study, and described my role in the research process as that of a facilitator to enable the participants' voices to be heard.
- At the start of the individual interviews and continually throughout the study I worked to build and maintain trust with each participant. During the individual and focus group interviews I consciously cycled through four phases of questioning: exploration, elaboration, clarification, and verification. Exploratory questions were open and general, used in an attempt to access a broad base of general information in relation to the phenomenon of the study. Questions designed to provide further elaboration of concepts or comments made by participants were used in an attempt to generate additional related information. Specific and direct questions of clarification were used to address ambiguous information shared within the conversation and were used by the

participants themselves within the focus group sessions. Specific and direct questions related to verification were posed to confirm my understanding of comments made throughout the interviews.

- Throughout the interpretation phase I used two questions to guide my selection of the data: What does this mean to the participants and to the field, and why is it important to participants and to the field?

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to credibility of the research as a "trustworthiness criterion" and pointed to the importance of member-checking to ensure that the study participants "agree to honor" the researcher's interpretations in that those who provide the data must find the interpretation of the data credible (pp. 328-329). A critical purpose of this research study was to represent the perspectives of the participants authentically; thus member checks were conducted continuously throughout the study. My purpose was clear from the conception of this study that the voices of educational assistants needed to be heard. In order to honor their position, I consciously looked for ways to share with participants the information as it became available, while protecting their anonymity.

Throughout the research, all participants demonstrated their active involvement and commitment to their role in the study. The participants' comments and actions reflected their view of themselves not only as representing their personal perspective in relation to the phenomenon of the study, but also as representing the concerns and welfare of their colleagues in the field. The participants commented that they had had purposeful discussions following the individual interviews with other assistants in the

field to verify their hunches in relation to the issues that they had discussed with me. After the focus group interview sessions, the participants individually provided via e-mail and telephone contact additional information that they had thought of to confirm what had been discussed during the focus group.

To verify the data collected within this study, I have provided an audit trail of audiotapes of individual and focus group interviews, transcriptions of all interviews, flipchart records of the focus group interviews and artifacts that were produced during the analysis of the data.

This qualitative study does not claim to generalize its finding across situations. It is expected that the same study conducted with six different participants would yield different data because of the human factors involved in interpreting the meaning of one's practice. However, what made this study significant was that the six diverse participants in the study confirmed the validity of the findings of the study across their situations. The *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998) defined *resonant* as "having the power to bring images, feelings, or memories to mind." Each participant's description of her needs and her perceived role and responsibilities as an educational assistant resonated among the participants. It is my hope that the information provided in this study will resonate with educators in the field who will have a deeper understanding of the practice of educational assistants who are working within inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to reliability in qualitative research as having more meaning in human terms, suggesting that reliable research can be described in the same way as the behavior of a reliable person; that is, one who is "consistent, dependable, and predictable" (p. 293). Merriam (2001) stated, "It's not

whether the findings will be found again but whether the results are consistent with the data collected" (p. 206).

The trustworthiness of this study will be determined if educators gain a deeper understanding of the practice of educational assistants working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders. Each study participant commented that her participation in the research process had made a difference to her practice after the second focus group interview. When I met with the research participants to share the draft of the data and interpretation chapters of the thesis, each participant initiated a discussion on how the research experience had continued to affect her practice.

Chapter Summary

The design of the study needed to be flexible in order to accommodate the changes that needed to be made throughout the research process. For example, during the data collection phase, interviewing three participants in May/June of 2001 enabled me to analyze the data and redevelop the individual interview questions prior to interviewing the next three participants.

I anticipated going into the study that the cycle of the school year would influence the work placements of the study participants. Two of the three participants interviewed in May 2001 were not reassigned to work with students with severe behavior disorders the following school year. Both participants had years of experience working with students with severe behavior disorders, and I suspect that their reflective comments made from this different perspective during the focus group interviews provided a broader range of response than may have been offered without this change to their work placement.

It was necessary for me to analyze the data collected from the individual and focus group interviews continuously throughout the study in order to focus the group discussion and verify the participants' responses. As categories emerged from the data, the participants were asked to elaborate on and verify the information. This method of revisiting previously stated, ambiguous information provided an opportunity for the participants to link additional related information to the category being discussed, which provided a deeper level of discussion of the topic.

Initially, the research design included an individual interview with each participant, followed by a focus group interview, followed by another individual interview with each participant to confirm each participant's perspective. After analyzing the data from the first focus group discussion, it became apparent that the group discussion yielded common, in-depth information from the participants from a deeper level of discussion than the individual interviews had provided. As a result, the original design of the research was changed to accommodate a second focus group session, with the option of a second individual interview if the participants felt that it was necessary.

Openness, flexibility, and opportunity for maximum participant involvement were characteristics of the design of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to explore and begin to understand the nature of the practice of educational assistants who are working with students with severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms. Participants' responses within the individual and focus group interviews related to two foundational questions embedded in the conceptual framework of the study:

1. What do the participants need in order to be effective in their practice?
2. What roles and responsibilities do the participants associate with their work?

The participants' common patterns of response within the data collected during the individual and focus group interviews were analyzed to form categories within the following five themes:

1. the teacher's knowledge,
2. the teacher's classroom leadership,
3. the required administrative support,
4. the issues related to the terms and conditions of employment, and
5. the personal and professional skills required by educational assistants.

This chapter is divided into two sections based on the two foundational questions of the study. Section 1 presents my analysis of participants' comments made during the individual and focus group interviews related to question one, What do the participants need in order to be effective in their practice? Participants' responses were analyzed to form four themes related to (a) the teacher's knowledge, (b) the teacher's classroom

leadership, (c) the required administrative support, and (d) the issues related to terms and conditions of employment.

Section 2 presents data generated during the interviews from participants' comments related to question two, What roles and responsibilities do participants associate with their practice? Participants' responses were analyzed to form the theme of personal and professional skills of the educational assistant. The categories within this theme are associated with three common areas: in relation to the student(s) to whom the assistant is assigned, in relation to the classroom teacher(s), and in relation to the position.

Throughout the process of analysis, the participants' response patterns frequently overlapped across categories. The categories were nested in the themes and were highly interrelated and difficult to separate.

Within the presentation of the findings of this study, the six participating educational assistants are named Diane, Fran, Gloria, Leanne, Sandy, and Trudy, which are all pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

Section 1: Research Question 1

What do the participating educational assistants need in order to be effective in their practice?

Four themes emerged from the data that relate to this question: (a) the teacher's knowledge, (b) the teacher's classroom leadership, (c) the required administrative support, and (d) the issues related to the terms and conditions of employment. Each of the themes will be discussed in the sections that follow through elaboration of the

relationship of the associated categories with each theme to the practice of educational assistants.

Theme 1: The Teacher's Knowledge

The theme of the relationship of the teacher's knowledge to the practice of educational assistants developed from the following five categories which outlined the need for the teachers to:

- understand the role of the educational assistant in the classroom,
- support and accommodate the educational assistant's role in the classroom,
- provide effective classroom behavior management,
- adapt learning materials and modify curriculum activities and the learning environment, and
- value inclusion.

Understand the Role of the Educational Assistant in the Classroom

With the advent of inclusive education practices, the role of the educational assistant has changed from what started as a clerical, "housekeeping" position to one that primarily supports students with special needs. Participants maintained that teachers who work with assistants in order to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders in their classroom need to be willing to share the responsibility and to be involved in the process of finding ways to work with the student. Leanne portrayed the challenges of working with "teachers who have been teaching more than five years without an assistant in the classroom [because they] have developed their own ways to get all the jobs they need done in the classroom themselves." She indicated that the initial challenge for assistants in these classrooms is to convince the teachers that the assistant is a capable

person who can help the teacher and then demonstrate to the teacher ways to utilize the assistant's skills. Gloria contended that the needs of students within classrooms are changing and that "it is out of *need* that teachers have realized that assistants can help them with these very 'needy' kids." Fran confirmed from her experience that it is critical for teachers to understand the role of the assistant in order to optimize the resources that are available to support the needs of students with severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms. Trudy suggested that when teachers have a clear understanding of the assistant's role in the education process, they know "what the assistant is there for, who the assistant is there for, and how they can work together as a team."

Gloria urged teachers to take time to find out "what training and experience the assistant has" in order to recognize and utilize the individual's strengths and understand how the assistant can support students with special needs and the teacher in the classroom. Participants were sensitive to the challenges that teachers experience in their classrooms and described how assistants can support the teacher's practice, if the teacher will accept the support. Trudy explained, "Many times it is their not knowing that they have the support when dealing with the student." Participants described their role in these situations as working separately but together, in the classroom; for example, "You do your job and I do mine."

The participants felt that it is important that teachers who are new to a school and who are uncertain about the role of the assistant in the classroom not feel threatened by the knowledge that an experienced assistant may be able to share. Sandy pointed out that when an assistant is successful in working with a student, it must not be interpreted as "somehow lacking in the teacher that he or she was not able to achieve the same gains."

She described differences between the assistant's work and the teacher's work: "The assistant is often able to spend more time with the individual student, whereas the teacher must divide his/her attention among all students in the class." Trudy added that the assistant is not trying to overstep his or her bounds or take over that teaching moment. Fran noted:

> It's just that the assistant may have experience and knowledge that may click with that child, and the child is able to respond to the assistant more than the student could respond to the teacher. It's not undermining the teacher's abilities, it's just something that has happened.

The participants acknowledged that it is important for teachers who have students with high behavior needs in their classrooms to understand the assistant's role is in the education process and to work together as a team. Gloria observed that when teachers respect the knowledge and the years of experience that the assistant has, they can understand how assistants can "help teachers do their job."

Support and Accommodate the Educational Assistant's Role in the Classroom

Accommodate is derived from the Latin word *acommodare*, meaning "to make fit" (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 1998). Participants described their dependence on teachers' support and accommodation of their role in the classroom. Trudy commented, "There are things that the assistant can do throughout the year to help your position, but the teacher really makes it or breaks it at the start." Leanne affirmed that "if the teacher values the assistant and treats this person with respect, then that is modeled for the students in the classroom."

The participants noted that when teachers create a role hierarchy that requires all classroom decisions and actions to be filtered through the teacher, this action can

overburden the teacher and results in the creation of unresolved issues with which the teacher simply does not have the time to deal in a meaningful way. Gloria commented that when teachers create a role hierarchy in the classroom, "assistants feel intimidated because they are made to feel inferior to the teacher and feel that they are not valued, rather than feeling a part of a team." Rather than limiting the assistant's initiative in contributing to the classroom learning environment, Gloria strongly advised teachers to foster role interdependence by "attaching importance to what we do, valuing who we are and what we can do." Trudy pointed to the fact that the role of the teacher is different from the role of the educational assistant, but they are "equally important in a well-run classroom; we work as a team."

When the participants were asked during the focus group interviews what they would like to see as some of the outcomes of this research, the overwhelming response was "more support and more respect." Leanne provided an example of increased support and respect as "inclusion in planning meetings where everybody's input is considered valuable and knowing you are part of the whole team." Diane concurred: "Knowing that you are valued." Gloria provided an example of the benefit to teachers of mutual role interdependence in relation to students with behavior disorders through the following scenario:

> If a student has to be supervised in time out and it is lunch time, you still need to go for your lunch, and someone else steps in and takes over during your break. The student knows that things are not going to change because there is a different person in the time-out area. The consequence is not from that one person. The consequence is related to your behavior, and it affects everyone, not just that one person who gave the student the consequence.

The participants unanimously agreed that the teacher definitely sets a tone at the beginning of the year as to whether or not the students will respect the position of the

educational assistant in the classroom. They indicated that the way the teacher introduces the assistant to the class is extremely important for assistants working within inclusive classrooms with students with severe behavior disorders. Diane confirmed that "if the students don't think the teacher respects the assistant, it doesn't matter what I try to do, I am going to have a tough time trying to get that student to respect me, and it becomes a power struggle." Fran suggested

> introducing the assistant as Mr./Ms. who is here to help you with your work, and you are expected to treat him/her the way you would treat me. The teacher then has set the tone that the teacher respects the assistant and that the teacher expects the students to respect the assistant as well.

Fran reiterated the importance of the teacher's message to the class that "if a student has a problem or needs help, there are two of us in the room to help."

It became apparent throughout the interviews that the scope of practice of educational assistants who are working in inclusive classrooms with students with severe behavior disorders is dependent on the practice of the teachers with whom they work. The participants described how the roles of assistants within their schools vary across a broad continuum depending on the teacher's perceptions of the assistant's role. Some teachers assign only specific clerical tasks to their assistants, whereas other teachers have their assistants work independently with students in consultation with the teacher.

For assistants working with students who have severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms, the teacher's practice significantly impacts the assistant's practice. Gloria described the interdependence of the assistant's role and the teacher's practice in terms of support or limitations placed on the assistant by the teacher; for example:

> This year I am with a teacher who is very open, and I will go to her and say, "I think this group is ready to do this. . . . Should I take them on, . . . or what do you suggest?" I have a lot of input into this particular area of the program for this group of students.

Leanne reinforced this perspective by describing her work in situations in which the teacher has said, "Just do whatever you need to do; I just don't want to have anything to do with this student. . . . Just keep him out of my hair." Leanne went on to describe this teacher as having no interest in working as a team or in finding out whether there was something else that she could do to contribute to the class.

Throughout the interviews it was evident that assistants are limited in the amount of work that they can initiate on their own and that they need support from teachers in order to do their jobs.

Provide Effective Classroom Behavior Management

The discussions in this area centered around the notion that the nature of students and classrooms has changed and that there is a need to prepare teachers to deal with these changes. Leanne suggested, "Many new graduates in teacher education still hold a general view that special needs means segregated classrooms with a resource teacher, and they seem to think they won't have to deal with these students." The participants confirmed the need "for teachers coming out of university to have a minimum of one behavior management course because within the first few years of teaching they are going to be working with these students." Fran also suggested that teachers need coursework "related to working with students with special needs because inclusion continues to grow."

Gloria emphasized the need for new teachers to have training in classroom management strategies: "It is just a fact of life, these are the kids you are dealing with now. Behavior kids are in every classroom, not just the segregated, special education placements." Leanne confirmed that "[these students] may not all be coded, but there will be someone in the class who has behavior difficulties." Leanne went on to describe how the teacher's classroom management approach with the entire class can help students with severe behavior disorders to "curb their impulses and fit in if the rules and the rewards are for everyone in the class, not just the students with behavior disorders."

Trudy confirmed that

> when the behavior reward system includes the entire class, not just the student with a behavior disorder, it puts the onus back onto the group of students as a whole; and they pull together to remind one another about appropriate behavior, which helps my student become a part of the group, who are working on the same outcome.

The participants expressed the need for teachers with whom they work to understand the nature of the needs of students with behavior disorders and to support differences in academic and behavioral programming related to the needs of each student. Gloria stated, "It is important for these kids to have consistency and routine so that they know where they stand. If I break this rule, this is what is going to happen and it *is* going to happen."

The participants confirmed that assistants working with students with challenging behavior need the support and understanding of the teacher. Leanne gave examples of specific strategies, such as "limiting transition time and providing structure. . . . If the teacher is knowledgeable in these areas and understands how they can be used to control outbursts, it makes it much easier to work with my student in this classroom."

Adapt Learning Materials and Modify Curriculum Activities and the Learning Environment

There was general agreement among the participants that teachers who do not understand the need to adapt curriculum materials and learning activities have difficulty collaborating with educational assistants. Sandy noted that students with severe behavior disorders frequently "lack the self-esteem associated with task completion, and teachers need to be aware of the fact that equipment and materials need to be adapted to meet the learning needs of these students." She confirmed that "whether it is the assistant or the teacher who adapts the material, it is important to do it."

Trudy proposed that students with behavior disorders often need their classroom workloads adapted. Many times, "it is the quantity that is overwhelming; it is often not the content." The participants reiterated the importance of teachers' understanding that for some students with challenging behavior, it is sufficient to demonstrate understanding of the material without having to complete the same quantity of material as the rest of the class.

Fran expressed concern about the multiple responsibilities that teachers face in meeting the needs of all students in inclusive classrooms, which can seem overwhelming at times. She remarked that "new teachers seem to have difficulty adapting materials because they are swamped with developing program for the class and see adapting as one more thing they have to do."

It was also suggested that teachers must be sensitive to the fact that if an assistant is working with more than one student on an individual program plan (IPP), those students have customized academic programs and are not necessarily working at the same

level. Gloria felt that "some teachers think, you've only got three kids; they should all be working together on the same thing, which is not possible."

The participants in the study also stressed the importance of teachers' understanding that the majority of educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders need access to a structured academic program in which the student's progress can be documented. As well, because of the nature of the student's disability, the educational assistant needs access to an isolated physical space within the school to which the assistant can remove the student from the regular classroom to deal productively with emotional and behavioral issues as they arise.

Student need for an authentic academic program. The need for students with severe behavior disorders to have a clearly defined academic plan was described in a number of ways. Fran pointed out, "In order to do my job within the school, I need to have a very workable program for the student. A lot of these students need structure, they need to know what is happening, they need to know what is going to happen." Fran went on to describe the interrelatedness of an authentic, adapted academic program and the student's motivation for learning as follows:

> I have been torn between knowing I can do more for this student and being told, "No, just forget about it." Part of the frustration in working with students with severe behavior disorders is that if they do not have a planned academic program, it is hard to motivate them to do the work, to build their self-worth and self-confidence. . . . This puts a lot of stress on the assistant because you question yourself: Am I going to be able to do this? Am I making a difference?

Describing the reality of working with students who have severe behavior disorders, Sandy warned that educators can at times rely too heavily on medications to ameliorate the student's classroom learning and behavior, and "the education program does not get put on hold because the parents won't give the child medication."

Available alternate work area. The participants related that the majority of their time was spent within the regular classroom. However, because of the nature of the student's disability, there are times when the student needs a safe physical space to work outside of the classroom learning environment. The participants acknowledged that although the goal for students with severe behavior disorders is to include them in the regular classroom learning activities as much as possible, because of the nature of their disability, sometimes the student needs a break from the class. Fran commented:

> When I took my student into a classroom of thirty students, he just could not mentally, emotionally, and physically take the noise level. The class was not particularly noisy, but to this student it was *extremely* loud, and he just could not cope with it.

Diane noted there are times when "students with severe behavior need a quiet, safe place to work to enable the assistant to focus on the task with the student." Fran described the reality of the learning situation for a student with challenging behavior working with an adapted academic program:

> When implementing a program, a lot of times you need to have discussion with the student if they are having a bad day. It is difficult to have a meaningful discussion in the regular classroom with the teacher teaching, the other students responding, and the student you are trying to work with trying to listen to you and to the teacher while attending to all of the other things that are going on in the classroom.

Diane acknowledged that "sometimes the class environment can be overwhelming to a child with behavior disorders, and they don't care to really be a part of that."

The participants referred to the need to have an alternate location to work with the student away from the class group when the student with severe behavior begins losing control to keep the student, the staff, and the other students safe.

Value Inclusion

Throughout the interviews the participants frequently referred to the importance of the teacher's beliefs and attitudes in relation to the inclusion of students with behavior disorders in the classroom. Trudy described its importance this way:

> My student started out with high behavioral needs, and the teacher was very open to that. It's a good feeling to walk in at the beginning of the year, knowing you have support and *you are wanted*. It made a big difference. . . . The classroom was a good place for us to go.

It was also very apparent from participants' descriptions throughout the discussions that students with behavior disorders need a sense of place, a feeling that they belong, and that meeting the needs of these students is a shared responsibility. Focus group discussion on student inclusion and belonging highlighted the combined social and academic benefits for students who are included with age-appropriate behavior models. Gloria reflected on her experiences of how "the child begins to self-manage within that controlled classroom setting." As well, the participants described the benefits of working with the student with behavior disorders within the context of the regular classroom setting as leading to increased awareness and understanding of behavior by both the individual student and the other students in the class. Trudy noted the importance of "teaching the class what we can do to help one another out, without singling out the student with severe behavior. Let's help everybody deal with frustration and anger, not just this child."

Gloria reinforced the need to teach appropriate behavior within the context of the regular classroom setting: "It is amazing when you start teaching them in a group situation to hear their responses to one another and the questions they come up with. . . . The students need to hear this from one another."

Trudy pointed to additional benefits of inclusion for both the student and the assistant in that "inclusion reduces the number of adults that the child needs to deal with in a day. For me having one boss really helps. This year I wasn't accountable to three different teachers with different ideologies to work with."

The participants agreed that including a child with strong behavioral concerns in the regular class, combined with high numbers of students in these classrooms, can create additional disruptions. But they also emphasized that behaviorally challenged students benefit by being exposed to age-appropriate, acceptable behaviors demonstrated by their peers in the regular classroom setting. Leanne noted that sometimes it can be "a fear factor" for the teacher, who may feel that "it's going to wreck my whole year, having this kid in the class"; but if a student has the support of an assistant and "if the teacher has some strategies to draw on and some training, it can be a productive year."

The participants described the many challenges that they had experienced in trying to include students with severe behavior disorders in a regular classroom when the teacher did not support the student's placement. Trudy said:

> There is nothing worse than walking into a classroom and having the teacher know nothing about your student related to their academic or social needs or not wanting you to be there. It's hard for both of us. . . . You are trying to keep the behaviors down, and you're concerned that if the behaviors get out of control, your inclusion time will be cut back; it's understandable.

However, as Fran pointed out, "Many times the teacher does not want the child in the class because they do not know how to approach the situation and they do not know what to do."

Trudy summed it up by saying:

> I've met some wonderful teachers, but if they don't want those kids in their classroom, if they feel uncomfortable, no matter how great the communication is, it doesn't work. The teacher I work with is very open and willing; she was good about taking over if I was off in another part of the classroom and he was acting up. She was very consistent, and he responded quickly. She dealt with the problems that arose when she had them, and I could do other things that she needed me to do or what other children in the class needed. She was willing to have us in there and that makes all the difference. The teacher has to be a believer in making inclusion work. You can make it run smoothly, but you can't make it as productive as it could be for everyone.

Theme 2: The Teacher's Classroom Leadership

Throughout the individual and focus group interviews the participants consistently referred to the importance of teachers providing leadership within the classroom in relation to the student's program and the assistant's practice within the scope of the teacher's practice. This theme is composed of the following eight categories related to the teacher's ability to provide classroom leadership in order to:

- provide direction for the student's program,
- clarify expectations of classroom staff positions,
- support a classroom team work model,
- share ongoing feedback with the educational assistant,
- value input from the educational assistant,
- support decisions made by the educational assistant,
- share expertise and information with the educational assistant, and
- enable the assistant to work with other students in the classroom.

Provide Direction for the Student's Program

The participants described the assistant's dependence on the teachers with whom they work to provide direction for the student's academic program. Sandy's comments

were strongly endorsed by the group: "Teachers are the curriculum experts; they are the ones with the overall expectations for the student, with the time frames involved. Although there has to be a lot of give and take, that teacher is responsible for the whole class." Diane added, "The teacher has a huge part in helping me set up programs for what the children need to do."

The participants emphasized their need for time to talk to their teachers to share ideas and strategies for supporting their students. As well, they discussed the importance of teachers' formally evaluating the student's progress in relation to the goals set out in the student's individual program plan.

Clarify Expectations of Classroom Staff Positions

The participants noted that educational assistants who are working with students with severe behavior disorders may work under the direction of one or more teachers, and as a result it is critical for teachers and assistants to share and clarify their work-related expectations of one another at the time when they begin working together. The participants proposed that this practice leads to stronger support of one another in the classroom and more efficient use of classroom human resources because one person does not have to interpret what the other needs. Trudy suggested that it would be helpful for assistants if teachers were to clarify "what they would like help with." She went on to discuss how teachers differ in their approach to the classroom and the importance of teachers' clarifying their needs because "there might be something that this teacher would like you to do that the last teacher you worked with didn't want you to do."

These participants identified the importance of teachers' clarifying the assistant's authority in relation to the behavior plan for the student. As previously described, many

times the assistant, who often knows the student better than the teacher does because of the amount of time that they spend together, can sense when the child is becoming frustrated within the context of the classroom and can take the student to an alternate location within the school, which may divert a violent student outburst. Fran described her need to know "what authority do I have in order to cope with this child. Can I remove the child on my own initiative, and where do you want me to take him?" Gloria noted that the area of managing student behavior is one in which "most teachers are willing to ask for and accept support"; however, the teacher needs to clarify his or her expectations of the student's program and the assistant's role in the classroom.

The participants confirmed that, as much as possible, the teacher needs to share with the assistant how the teacher would like the assistant to work in the classroom with both the student with severe behavior disorders and other students in the class. Fran gave an example: "If the teacher is teaching a new concept and the student with severe behavior disorders that the assistant would normally be working with is having a really good day, what would you like the assistant to be doing?" Or, as Leanne pointed out, what expectations does the teacher hold for the assistant when the student is absent?

Support a Classroom Team Work Model

The participants described their fundamental need for teacher support. Trudy stated, "This year has been absolutely awesome, and a lot of that is due to the support of the teacher I am working with." When reflecting on their work, the participants indicated that when assistants are authentically included in the classroom practice, a sense of team work develops; and, together, the team is stronger than either individual would be working alone. Trudy related that after a particularly challenging day in the classroom

she could say, "That was really rotten, but tomorrow will be different; *we* are going to change it."

Fran expressed her concern that "in too many schools the educational assistant is perceived to be the teacher's assistant and is not recognized as part of the education team and is perceived as being disposable."

Share Ongoing Feedback With the Educational Assistant

When the participants talked about the need for teachers to share feedback with their assistants on a regular basis, their descriptions related primarily to two main areas: what the assistant was doing in relation to the teacher's practice and what the assistant was doing regarding the student's program.

Feedback in relation to the assistant's work with the teacher. Regarding the assistant's work in relation to the teacher, the participants stressed the need for teachers to be prompt, open, and honest in their willingness to share information with the assistant when there is something that the assistant is doing that the teacher either did not want done or wanted done differently, rather than letting things "fester" and becoming frustrated. For a healthy working relationship within the classroom, the participants stressed that the giving and receiving of feedback needs to be ongoing. Gloria suggested, "This information needs to be shared on a daily basis. It's too late at the end of the year to say, 'These are the things that need to change.'" Trudy also suggested that it is equally important for teachers "to share information with you about something you are doing well." Throughout the interviews the participants frequently referred to the fact that they were there to support teachers, and as Trudy said, "Tell me if you don't like what I'm

doing, I'm not helping you out, and maybe you've got a better idea that I haven't thought about."

Feedback on the assistant's work in relation to the student's program. The participants commented that because of the nature of the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, assistants working with these students often find themselves working apart from the class. They need feedback from the teacher, as Fran stated, "to know that you are on the right track in the way you are dealing with this student, and to confirm that what we are doing and the program we have set up is working." Leanne also mentioned, "I don't see a lot of progress taking place and significant changes in my student's overall condition." The participants felt that the gains that these students make in their individual program plans frequently take an extensive period of time to occur when compared with students with other disabilities.

The participants urged teachers not to withhold feedback information until something goes wrong. Leanne recounted, "When things are going well, there seems to be a perception that it's getting done so we won't have to sit down and talk to her about what she is doing."

Value Input from the Educational Assistant

Students who are funded because of a severe behavior disorder will have an individual program plan that the teacher oversees and the educational assistant implements. The participants emphasized the importance of being involved in participatory decision making related to the student's program plan if the educational assistant has been working with the student on a regular basis for a period of time. Gloria contended that the assistant usually possesses a great deal of information about the

student and "knows what they are capable of doing and when they are ready to move on to new information." The participants stressed that teachers need to have confidence in and ask for input from their assistants. Gloria observed that teachers need to ask questions of their assistant, such as "How is the student doing? What are you doing that's working?" Asking the assistant for input into the student's program provides the teacher with an opportunity to learn what the assistant has done to create success for that student that may be useful with other students or with that student when the assistant is not present. The participants encouraged teachers to be open to suggestions from the assistant and emphasized the importance of teachers knowing the background experience and training of the assistant. Then, Gloria stated, when the assistant makes a suggestion related to the student's program, "the teacher understands you are talking because you have dealt with this before or you have training, and you have learned what works and what doesn't work."

The participants concurred that when they were asked for input into the student's program, they felt "valued" and that their "opinions count for something." Fran recalled feeling valued when a teacher had listened to what she had to say and "included me in helping to develop the IPPs, and we would discuss the students' programs as to what we could expect the student to be doing if we set up this program."

According to the participants, feeling valued increases their personal commitment to their position. Trudy stated:

> I feel that the teacher I work with respects and supports my work. We work side by side; there is no hierarchy in the classroom. We are both there for different reasons, and our work is equally important. When you feel that you are appreciated, you don't mind going the extra mile.

When the participants were asked during the focus group interview, "What gets in the way of your being able to do your best work?" the overwhelming response was "lack of teacher support."

Support Decisions Made by the Educational Assistant

The participants confirmed that when assistants work with students with severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms, the assistant at times will be required to remove the student from the class group. They emphasized the importance of teachers having confidence in the assistant to know when this action needs to occur for the well-being of either the student or the class group. Diane described this support: "The teachers did not expect [my student] to be in class if he shouldn't have been there. They really give us credit for knowing what the student needs." Trudy added, "The teacher trusted my judgment, and that's very important to me because unless you are with that child, you don't always see the whole situation."

When attempting to have a student with severe behavior disorders comply with a classroom request, Leanne emphasized, "I need support in the classroom for the decisions I make regarding my student." If a student's behavior warrants removal from the classroom and the student is not complying Leanne said that she needs

> to be able to look to the teacher for support. If I am having problems, come and help me out with this. Removing the student from the classroom was my job. Sometimes teachers are hesitant to step in because I might be angry if they come in and try to assist. No, if I'm having problems, come and help me out.

The participants emphasized the importance of the teacher's supporting their decisions and providing consistency related to their students, rather than taking over the decision or consequence in front of the student. This support reinforces the assistant's

authority and confirms to the student that he or she must comply with what the assistant is requesting. Gloria noted that "when a teacher steps in and takes over, it is difficult for the students to understand that we both agree with the consequences for this behavior. We need to both be enforcing the consequences." She added, "If the student is saying 'no' to me and the teacher comes over and says the same thing, that is often enough to get the student to comply."

Share Expertise and Information With the Educational Assistant

The participants' descriptions of their work reflected the situational nature of classroom practice in that the meaning of the assistant's practice is derived from the context in which it occurs. The participants explained that teachers and assistants frequently find themselves having to interpret situations within the context of the classroom. It is this situated aspect of their practice that makes communication critical. Fran noted, "As an educational assistant working with a teacher I've never worked with before, I need to meet with the teacher to discuss what the program is, how can I do it, where I can do it, is there a specific place."

Throughout the interviews the participants consistently shared their need for the teachers with whom they worked to share the student's program information with them. The participants viewed the teachers with whom they worked as a primary source of knowledge and expertise to meet the needs of the students. Fran confirmed, "I attribute some of my most beneficial job-related training to two particular teachers that were very willing to share their knowledge. They would describe scenarios to me and point out solutions that we could try."

The importance of teachers taking the time to share information related to the student's program was described by Fran.

> I find that when a program is set up for a student, the teacher may envision it differently than the way the assistant does. So it is really important to share perspectives in order to maintain consistency for the student. Discuss with the assistant what the program is that you envision for the student. Be open to discuss what the assistant could add from his/her experience. Is there something else that the assistant could be doing or should not be doing? From your perspective as a teacher, how would you like to see the program set up? How do you want the assistant to implement it?

Diane added, "The teachers I work with have confidence in me as a team member. I can go to the teacher and say, 'This and this is happening; what do you think I should do?' They are there for me and will say, 'Why don't you try this and this?'"

When they work together in classrooms to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, that participants stressed that it is important for the teacher and the assistant to share information related to the behavior plan for that student. For example, as Fran noted, "Establish a list of consequences we are going to use."

The participants referred to the critical need for teachers to share related information concerning the student in order for the assistant to better meet the social, emotional, physical, and academic needs of the student. Leanne stated, if only the teacher knows that "Johnny had a run-in with his mom this morning, and I'm insisting he get out his pencil and work, we are headed for unnecessary difficulty."

Sandy described the importance of sharing information in order to build a team: "It comes back to the need very early in the year that the assistant and the teacher need to get to know one another and build a rapport. Otherwise they simply cannot work as a team." Fran added another suggestion related to the basics of this team-building process: that teachers "meet with the assistant and find out what the assistant feels the role and

responsibilities of the assistant are; find out how experienced the assistant is in the area they are going to be working in."

Throughout the interviews participants consistently referred to the fact that they want to support the teachers with whom they work, and in order to do this, they require that the teacher share critical information with them. Fran commented, "I feel the teacher is in control of the classroom and is responsible for what happens in the classroom, and I don't need to contribute to the stress level by unintentionally doing something that the teacher dislikes." There was agreement among the participants that because teachers differ in their ways of teaching and in their uses of different strategies, it is the teacher's responsibility to share this information with the assistant. Trudy suggested guiding questions for this conversation could include the following:

> How do you feel about us being in your classroom? . . . Do you have any reservations? . . . What are your expectations of me in addition to that child's program? . . . How would you like to see my role expanded in your classroom? . . . What don't you want me to tackle?"

Many times assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders begin to feel somewhat isolated and drained as a result of the tremendous amount of emotional and cognitive energy required to meet the needs of these students. In order to retain individuals in the field, the participants unanimously agreed that the teacher's support is required for the assistants to do their job. Leanne stated, "You need support because without it, you burn out."

To maintain the level of consistency required for both teachers and assistants to be effective in their work, the participants stressed that the teacher and the educational assistant need to continually negotiate their needs in relation to the student and classroom requirements, rules, and resources.

Enable the Assistant to Work With Other Students in the Class

At some point throughout the interviews all of the participants discussed the importance of the assistant's working with other students in class in addition to the student to whom they are specifically assigned. Generally, the participants saw this action as a combined benefit for the teacher, the other students, and their assigned student. As well, Gloria cautioned, "You need to be kept busy for the child's independence. The child you are assigned to needs to realize there are times when he needs to be independent." Sandy noted the importance of the assistant's working with other children in the classroom to prevent children from forming the perception that the student with behavior disorders "is the only student who needs help in this classroom."

The participants addressed the need for the assistant to work with more than their assigned student during the day and described the planning challenges that this can create for the teacher because of the inconsistency of the behavior of the assistant's assigned student. Leanne described how the uncertainty of the student's behavior "makes it difficult for the teacher to plan to count on me to be doing something with other students in the class if I have to be in the time-out room with my student."

The need to provide opportunities for the educational assistant to work with other students at some point in the day was identified as a major factor in retaining competent people in this position. Leanne stated, "The other kids in the classroom are the treat in my day. I'm not saying that the student I work with does not give me pleasure in the day; . . . it's just more difficult to see sometimes that he has had a good day."

Theme 3: The Required Administrative Support

The principal's challenge, as proposed by Gharajedaghi (1999), is to build a viable social system by creating unity in diversity and "meeting the varying interests of independent members operating in an interdependent whole" (p. 164).

The participants talked about how important it was for the school administrator to:

- set a tone for the role of the educational assistant in the school,
- include educational assistants as staff members,
- view the student's program as shared responsibility,
- share information with the educational assistant,
- support flexible scheduling,
- support joint planning time for the classroom team,
- determine the educational assistant's placement,
- evaluate the educational assistant's work, and
- support ongoing in-service learning.

Set a Tone for the Role of Educational Assistant in the School

Just as the teacher is instrumental in setting a tone for the value of the work of the assistant in the classroom, the participants believed that the principal sets a tone for the manner in which the assistant's contribution will be received within the school. Leanne noted, " If the administration considers you valuable, it sets the tone for the entire school; . . . the teachers, students, and parents consider you valuable." Diane added:

> Our principal has instilled in the staff that assistants get the same respect as teachers. The students are expected to talk to me just as they would talk to a teacher. There is no difference. Our principal would not tolerate anyone saying, "You're just a TA."

When the participants were asked what advice they would give principals that would help them to help assistants do their job effectively, they all concurred: "Give them support." Diane confirmed the need for principals to "make the assistants feel that they are a valuable part of the staff. If the principal doesn't value assistants, the staff are often at a loss as to what to do." She added, "The principal makes a big difference for assistants in the school. The principal makes it happen. The assistants are part of the team."

Fran commented, "I really feel valued in my school. Teachers will ask me for my input. I have to credit my principal for that because she always stresses the importance of team players and how we are all important and necessary players."

The participants referred to the importance of principals providing leadership in some areas that relate to the assistant and teacher working together. For example, they suggested that if teachers do not know how to work effectively with assistants, the principal needs to act on this.

Another area included principals' determining policy related to the assistants' role in the school and classroom. Fran provided an example: "In our school, discussion with parents about the student's academic program is done with the teacher and the assistant, not the assistant alone."

Include Educational Assistants as Staff Members

Throughout the interviews the participants consistently referred to the need to be included in schoolwide activities in order to gain access to information and feel authentically included as staff members. Leanne gave the following example:

> You are invited to certain parts of the staff meeting. Certain things are not discussed with you that affect you. It is important for the emotional well-being of the staff to come together and discuss things that are important to everybody.

When describing her full inclusion at staff meetings, Diane acknowledged, "I would feel badly if I were asked to leave. That breaks up the staff as a whole. We have never been asked to leave. It would cause dissension. I'm part of the team, and that means a lot." Fran referred to the importance of hearing the teachers' and administrators' perspectives on issues during staff meetings in order to gain background information and be able to better support policies or concerns that teachers may have. She noted:

> You are able to listen not only to what is happening within the programs in the school, you are able to get feedback on the programs you are implementing for a student with severe behavior. Many times during the week staff are not able to share information about a student you are working with but can take a moment to let you know a small improvement they observed at some point. An assistant needs to hear this information, and many times these comments are shared at a staff meeting. You need to have that opportunity as well to hear what is happening socially amongst the teachers and the rest of the staff, and it's a really good time to observe your colleagues just to see how they are responding to some of the issues that are being discussed.

The need to be involved as a full participant in the initial school start-up information and meetings that occur at the beginning of the school year was identified; it is a critical time for assistants supporting students and teachers within the school. Diane described her schoolwide inclusion as follows:

> Our principal involves us. We come to the staff meetings, and we know what is going on even if it doesn't pertain to us. We are part of the staff, so we are at the staff meeting. On the professional development days, if the teachers are having a computer session, our principal involves us; we participate. We learn a lot through these opportunities. No one has ever said, "Oh, you're a TA. You shouldn't be here." They treat me like I know what I'm doing.

View the Student's Program as a Shared Responsibility

An overarching concern expressed by the participants throughout the interviews related to their need for their colleagues within the school community to perceive meeting the needs of students with severe behavior as a shared responsibility. The participants identified the need for administration to support the planned behavior intervention for students with severe behavior disorders who are included in regular classrooms. At times, school administrators can move the situation forward to a positive outcome faster because they are not involved in the specific classroom or playground incidents. Fran gave an example:

> When working with students with severe behavior, you really need to have support. At this school I know that if I am having a problem with a student and I need some help, all I have to do is send a student to the office and I will have someone come to help me.

Leanne added:

> The vice principal supports us when we need his help to restrain this child. We give him a call, and the vice principal has the child sit with him in his office. We've told this child, "You do this, and this will happen." We have the support in place and follow through with it.

Gloria noted that "this gives the administration an opportunity to see the child's behavior and some of the things we are dealing with. It helps administration to realize what your job entails when they are actually hearing and seeing the child threatening you."

A concern voiced by many participants throughout the interviews related to having the assistant assigned to the child for everything that the child does within the school day. This subtly makes the assistant responsible for the student's entire actions and behaviors rather than integrating the child into the context of the learning environment. Sandy related:

> For students with severe behavior, there will be some situations throughout the year in which the teacher and assistant dealing with this child are not going to be present. Other people have to be willing to learn a little about this child.

The participants noted that perceiving the needs of a student with severe behavior disorders as a shared responsibility results in greater consistency of approach by the staff who interact with the children on a daily basis. Trudy recalled:

> It took us until Christmas to get some consistency with the child because everybody had done something different with him. If you see him on the playground doing something, you do the same thing; the rules do not change just because I'm not there.

The logistics of this concept of shared responsibility was described by Fran: "You have to have everyone working together to help this student. Sometimes you are not out on supervision when your student is out for recess." The participants described the importance of other staff members taking some responsibility for the student's program during school times such as recess duty. Sandy described times at recess when people turn and say, "Get his assistant" or "He's yours; deal with him." The participants unanimously agreed that students with behavior disorders need consistency of intervention from all staff members with whom they interact during the day. Sandy concluded, "Although we are assigned to a child, that child is not our sole responsibility. The school has a responsibility to contribute to meeting the child's needs."

Share Information with the Educational Assistant

The participants agreed that because of the nature of the student's disability, it is important that information related to his or her academic, behavioral-programming, or medical needs be shared with the assistant. This provides the student with consistency and a planned academic program. Fran explained the need for medical information:

> The assistant really needs the student's medical information. What's happening with the child? Are they starting on medication? Are they on medication? Are they coming off medication? What kind of medication are they on? If you at least know what kind of medication the student is taking, you can research it yourself to learn the side effects, or what kind of behavior changes should I be expecting from the medication for the student?

The participants also mentioned their need to access information from other staff members in the school, such as someone who has worked with the student in the past, and to share program ideas and information with other assistants in the school. Sandy warned, "If people keep to themselves and try to do it all themselves, it just doesn't work because there aren't enough hours in a day to get a student motivated and keep them working."

Sandy emphasized that sharing program information is important for assistants who work with students with behavior disorders in order to attempt to provide continuity for the student's program:

> The student I work with has two teachers, a different one in the morning and in the afternoon, and then there are two assistants working with him. There has to be a lot of talking back and forth, and it is difficult to find the time to keep those lines of communication open. I found the other assistant and I have to catch one another constantly no matter where it is and just exchange information.

The participants also described their need for current information on what is happening at home. There are times when parents transport the student to school and take time to talk to the teacher and share critical information related to a personal matter. The assistant who is working with that student with severe behavior disorders must know this information to adapt the academic program to meet the student's needs. Fran provided an example:

> If we know something happened with Johnny in the morning, we may need to cut back on the workload and provide more incentives that particular day. The assistant can cope better with the student when the information you need to work with [the student] is shared with you.

When asked what could have been done to better prepare assistants for their work with their students with severe behavior disorders, Trudy stressed the need to share information with those involved with the student:

> Meeting with administration, the teacher, the parents if they choose to be there, and anybody who is going to be involved with this child. It is important for administration to be involved from the beginning because, ultimately, when you are having extremely bad days, they are going to see the student too. Shared information from previous assistants and classroom teachers who have worked with him—what worked, what hasn't worked—and let's all work together with this. How much do we tolerate in the classroom before the student is removed? Where is he removed to? Where do we draw the line? What's acceptable in the classroom? How far are we going to push this? What's plan B? And have everybody's support and agreement to do the same thing in order to be consistent, because that's number one for these children. All people working with this child need to be involved, including administration, because if all of a sudden they have to deal with this child because the behavior is out of control, you don't have time to talk about what we have been working on for the last two months, . . . what's important, . . . is he sent home. . . . There is no time for discussion at that point. The discussion has to be done right from the beginning, and do we agree on the steps? . . . Everybody has to be on the same wavelength.

The participants unanimously agreed that educational assistants need the opportunity to legitimately participate in meetings related to their students, to contribute to the student's individual program plan. This was reinforced in their desire to be included in student-teacher-parent conferences, case conferences, and all meetings related to discussing the academic, social, emotional, or physical needs of their students. Leanne recalled:

> With my student this year, I'm involved with all the meetings with his case workers and family. The student's psychologist, social worker, the two teachers, myself, and the parents have met to provide a long-range, very general overview of his program. I find the meetings beneficial and leave feeling we have a lot of support.

Gloria confirmed the importance of including the assistant in meetings related to the student's program, because "the assistant is the one who works most consistently with the

child, and most of the time it is the assistant who has found what works for the child or what triggers the behavior outbursts."

Referring to the reality of most inclusive classrooms, the participants described the teacher as orchestrating several levels of instruction occurring at the same time within any given curriculum area. The educational assistant is the person who usually spends more time working with this student than does the teacher because of the nature of the student's disability. The participants emphasized their need to be present at the student's case conference in order to share information and to benefit from information that is being shared from the perspective of each person. Gloria presented another perspective and questioned:

> When many of these kids go home and say, "Mr./Mrs. So-and-So wouldn't let me do this or said I couldn't do that," and these parents don't know who you are, how do the parents reinforce your authority from the home to the school when they do not have a face to attach it to?

Support Flexible Scheduling

The participants contended that one of the most challenging aspects of their assignments in working with students with severe behavior disorders relates to their daily schedule. It is not uncommon for an assistant to be assigned to the student during the in-class time as well as during all scheduled breaks. They described this practice as unhealthy for both the assistant and the student and related it to the perceived nature of the assistant's role as being solely responsible for the needs of the student. Fran observed:

> What happens is that assistants get the idea that they are doing the work for the child, and they forget about themselves and their own needs, and assistants who are working with students with severe behavior tend to get burned out.

Another observation made by the participants was that assistants who are hired to work with students with severe behavior disorders frequently do not get their allotted breaks during the day because the nature of the student's disability is such that the student requires constant supervision. Fran pointed out, "Many times you are expected to go out at lunch and recess with this student. In these situations the assistant does not get a break and is basically working seven hours a day, for six hours of pay, without a break."

Leanne described the difficulty of a student's being assigned solely to one assistant all day long:

> There is a familiarity, and you become the brunt of a lot of the student's frustration. You can be always the person to blame. That's part of the reason why you definitely need the support of your school staff, because they are the people who know this student in the same context of the setting as you do. . . . Even if it's just being in the staff room during recess, that is a diversion from your day, and it is necessary.

The participants emphasized the need for the daily schedule to incorporate balance to enable the student and the assistant to interact with others during the day. Leanne reported:

> I'm never in the staffroom when the staff are in there because of my supervision schedule. The nature of my job really needs that social interaction with staff or other adults. I need more outlets for diversion in my day. If I'm having a really bad day, it's no wonder I take it home, because there is nowhere else to leave it. As well, if you are constantly being directed to do supervision at recess and noon and you do not get a chance to interact with staff during breaks, you are out of the loop, and you don't feel supported.

The participants suggested that creative scheduling can accommodate some of these needs for allotted breaks; for example, during sustained silent reading time or during overlapping academic activities.

These participants strongly advised that administrators not schedule the assistant to start later in the morning in order to accommodate scheduling needs at the end of the day. Trudy cautioned, "It is very hard to start the morning at a later time than the rest of the class. It takes the first half hour to catch up on what has happened. It is disruptive for the teacher because you have to find out what is going on for the day." Gloria confirmed that "the first half hour of the day is the most unstructured time of the day, and it is when the most problems develop."

The participants discussed the need to consider scheduled breaks as a legitimate part of the work day and suggested that this time be used to build relationships with people on staff and within the school as a whole. Fran confirmed:

> I have found that I have been able to get more support from the teachers because I have been able to have my morning break and establish rapport with these staff members. There is a lot of general school information shared during break time, and it is a good way to find out and to know what is happening in other parts of the school. I find other staff members are much more willing to help you out when you have had a chance to develop rapport with them than when you don't have contact on a regular basis.

Leanne highlighted the reality of not having a chance to connect with staff:

> I resigned from a position in which I didn't have any outlet for laughter. I was on supervision three times a day. The time that I had in the staff room was by myself. There was not any time available to sit down and just share or laugh about the day because I was by myself.

Support Joint Planning Time for the Classroom Team

Classroom scheduling is a highly integrated part of the overall school schedule and, as a result, requires the support and input of the school administrator to co-ordinate planning time among staff members.

In the focus group discussion the participants emphasized the need for teachers and assistants to work together in order to meet the needs of students with behavior disorders. They identified their need for scheduled time to meet with teachers in order to do this. Gloria maintained that

> the assistant can have a strong behavior background and skills, but it is not a one-person job; it has to be a team approach. If the teacher has no idea of where you are coming from and what you are doing, . . . the approach you are taking or what's necessary to deal with this child, all the training you have means nothing if the teacher is not reinforcing what you are doing. When it doesn't work it seems to come back on the assistant, and it doesn't mean the assistant is not doing their job; it often means there is no support there.

Trudy affirmed that dynamic systems require joint planning time for staff. She said, "Imagine how much more we could do if we could have the time to meet to deal with the changes." In a discussion of the need for ongoing meeting time with the teacher, there was unanimous agreement among the participants that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find time to meet. Gloria stated, "Without the time to sit down and determine where we are going from here, the student's program is done in little bits and pieces, and it's not as well planned as it could be."

Diane described the need for joint planning time to

> discuss with the teacher what needs to be done so that I know what I'm going to be doing with the student and be able to resolve whatever has come up that day, . . . address what has gone wrong, and make the necessary changes or reinforce what went right.

This need for joint planning time was evident from the participants' responses throughout the study. Leanne confirmed, "These kids need to have a team working for them rather than playing it by ear or implementing very unplanned, unstructured plans of action."

Scheduling time to meet to discuss the student's program strengthens both program accountability and continuity. Gloria stated, "Our class changes on a daily basis. We have five students with severe behavior, and the consistency is not there because we are not able to sit down and talk about it." Trudy added, "It's very important for everybody who will be involved with this child to share their input because someone will come up with something you never thought about."

When assistants within this study were not able to meet on a regular basis with the teachers with whom they were working, more time was spent by the assistant in attempting to interpret the needs of the teacher and the students within the context of the classroom. Leanne reflected that "I spend a great portion of my day thinking what needs to be done, what can I be doing, where can I assist? If these things had been discussed beforehand, then it wouldn't be such a guessing game all the time."

Determine the Educational Assistant's Placement

The participants agreed that two years should be a maximum length of assignment with the same student with behavioral needs. Trudy confirmed "Another approach can be good for the student, and to stay longer doesn't benefit the child. Sometimes you don't realize how burnt out you were until you have a new situation." Gloria also felt that reassignment also benefits the students: "They need to have the adaptability to be able to adjust to someone else." Fran discussed a prolonged assignment with the same student within the elementary grades: "If the student has different educational assistants within their elementary school years, when they get to junior high school they are able to deal with change more readily."

The participants also described the value of maintaining continuity of staff to work with students with severe behavior disorders for more than one year. It was suggested that building trust is an important part of working together as a team. It takes time to develop and is important to maintain consistency for these students. Gloria said, "When you work with this student for one year, and the next year you are placed somewhere else, the continuity for the student is not there."

The participants discussed the need for long-term planning of staff assignments to also accommodate change of assignment for the assistant. Gloria noted that

> the administration knows the strengths of individual staff members, and sometimes when an assistant is effective in working with students with severe behavior, they will be continually reassigned to these students. If you have been in this position for a few years, you need to be assigned to a position that is *not* dealing with students with behavioral concerns.

Where there is a choice, placing students with severe behavior disorders in inclusive classrooms is a complex decision. Principals consider the perspective of the parents, the needs of the child, the needs of the classroom teacher in relation to all of the other students in the class, and the needs of the assistant. Trudy commented:

> Sometimes the teacher can request a specific assistant to be assigned to their classroom based on the assistant's training and experience. For example, they will take the student if they can have a specific assistant because they know the person has strengths in this area or knows the child.

The participants acknowledged that the principal determines staffing profiles for the school and that they appreciated administrators who, when possible, take into account the nature of human experience, consider the assistant's talents and personality, and place support staff in their area of strength. Trudy noted, "There are assistants in our school

who love working with students with severe disabilities, and other people can't do this. Administration needs to be aware of the individual's strengths and weaknesses."

Principals face challenges in attempting to reassign assistants within small schools where there are often not many funded students, and those with funding usually involve severe behavior. The participants acknowledged that there are times when the assistant has the option to change schools to assume another position; however, within a rural school district that option may involve a significant drive, which can be problematic because of the fact that educational assistants are not highly paid.

The participants commented on the reality of the workplace, that there are times when the principal makes every effort to place the assistant in a position that best fits with that individual's strengths and skills, but it is just not possible because of the nature of the student's needs. In these situations, Trudy advised, "if they have no other choice than to put you in that position that year, it goes back to, you have to want to be there."

Evaluate the Educational Assistant's Work

Formal evaluation of the work of educational assistants generally varies across schools, from nonexistent to yearly, written, formal performance appraisals. However, the participants in this study agreed that how educational assistants are evaluated tends to be strongly influenced by the support of the school administration of the process.

The participants described the importance of formal evaluations of their performance. They emphasized the need for this process to be professional and for periodic formal evaluations not to replace ongoing informal feedback. Diane related:

> We have yearly evaluations. It doesn't matter if you have been there two years or twenty years. The principal asks the teachers to document how they feel you are doing. A copy of the evaluation goes into my file at the school, and a copy is sent in to the county.

Gloria proposed:

> If assistants are to be evaluated on a regular basis, it must be done professionally, and the forms have to be designed in such a way that information that needs to be discussed in the classroom is not included. And there should be a follow-up: These were the things that were suggested; did these things happen? Were changes made? And document, yes, these were the things that the assistant changed. Somewhere it has to be documented that the follow-through happened.

The participants viewed the process of formal evaluation positively, particularly if the assistant is not getting regular feedback related to his or her performance, because, as Diane suggested, "you may be thinking you are doing a great job, and maybe the teacher is thinking you are not so great, or just the opposite."

The participants described their dependence on the teacher's attitude and perception of their role and the need for formal evaluations. Leanne suggested:

> If you have worked in the position for a long period of time and you have one particular teacher you are working with that doesn't value your work the way others have in the past, it is good to have your work history on paper. You can say, "You know what? I've never had this problem in the past seven years that I have worked here. This teacher has evaluated me this way or this way." Maybe that one evaluation does not hold so much weight when you have a file of documented information to back up what you are saying. Ideally, it should be communicated on a daily basis, but it is also for our own protection to have the information on file.

The uncertainty of the position presents another need for formal documentation. Gloria described another reality of the position:

> When assistants work with students with challenging behavior and begin to make gains with a student who has been out of control, the child becomes more manageable, and then suddenly another student comes into the school who is demonstrating more severe behavior concerns. The assistant who has been successful with the first student is then suddenly moved to work with this new student whose behavior is worse. In these circumstances there is no documentation on file related to the success that assistant was having with the initial student.

Another consideration in the need for performance appraisals is associated with the reality of assistants changing teachers on a regular basis. Sandy questioned:

> If an assistant worked with one teacher and met all of the expectations of that teacher, but the teacher the following year was radically different, would that assistant be penalized because possibly she was following the guidelines set out in the evaluation the previous year?

Fran identified an additional benefit of evaluations that relates to funding issues:

> I can see evaluations as a valuable tool to verify what assistants are doing, and this is why we need them in classrooms. When a copy is sent to the school board office, it may be a way for the board to see the need for assistants to be in the classroom. A record is provided of what the assistant is doing, and if a question arises with Alberta Learning related to the need for assistants, the board has documented information related to the need for our position in the classroom.

The need for assistants to have input into teachers' evaluations was also brought forward as a natural connection to team work. Gloria pointed out:

> If we are working as a team and the teacher is told to evaluate us, what's wrong with assistants providing input into the evaluation of the teachers they work with? It's related to the issue again of being valued for our role in the classroom. If we are working as a team and this process is designed to be a learning and growth opportunity, teachers can use the feedback from us just as we can use the feedback from the teachers.

The participants also identified the importance of school administrators taking an active role in the evaluation process. Gloria affirmed:

> It's important to hear from administration how you are doing, even if it is done every two years—just so that you know where you stand. If new administration comes in and they don't know you, there should be something on paper for you. They can ask people, but not everyone sees you through the same eyes.

Trudy added, "The administrator does not see you on a daily basis. It is important for this person to know what your strengths and weaknesses are when your assignment is being determined."

When asked what administrators could do to support assistants, Fran suggested communicating to the assistant "that they really understand what's going on or that they are supporting you. They need to come and give us some feedback on how we are doing with these students."

Support Ongoing In-Service Learning

Professional development is strongly connected to the school's financial resources and, as a result, requires the support of the school administration through both scheduling and providing financial support.

Because of the changing nature of the knowledge and skills required for the job, the participants suggested that education for assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders must be ongoing rather than a one-time event, and it needs to be integrated into the process of their daily work. The participants clearly identified ongoing professional development as a strong need for their continued effectiveness within their position. As Trudy said, "It helps you, the teacher, and the child you are working with." They expressed the need for the learning organization as a whole to understand that assistants need their professional development time and monies to be allotted to professional development activities in areas related to their work. Although attending staff meetings is related to the assistant's job and enhances his or her work, it is not professional development. Trudy commented that "some assistants use their discretionary time to attend staff meetings. I feel discretionary time should be designated to your professional development activities."

Trudy suggested that she would like

> assistants to be able to take the time to go to some of the training that is available. But if you take a day off work, you lose your wages, plus you have to pay for your course. This doesn't provide very much incentive for assistants to better themselves.

Theme 4: The Issues Related to Terms and Conditions of Employment

This was the area that generated the greatest concern on the part of the participants. Their responses associated with issues related to the terms and conditions of their employment fell within the following five categories:

- shortage of trained educational assistants to work with students who have severe behavior disorders;
- compensation for non-student contact time;
- hiring, recall, job security, and funding;
- representation on legal and ethical matters; and
- personal safety.

Shortage of Trained Educational Assistants to Work with Students Who Have Severe Behavior Disorders

There was agreement among the participants that because of the nature of the students' disability, it is difficult to find trained educational assistants to fill these positions. With an increase each year in the number of students in regular classrooms identified as having behavior disorders, the need for retaining competent people in assistant positions becomes even more important. Leanne suggested, "Schools have no other choice in many cases than to hire a student's mom to work with a student with severe behavior because they can't get a certified assistant to do that job." She went on to say:

> There seems to be a shortage of assistants to work in specific positions related to behavior. There are so many jobs available that the qualified people can pick and choose what they want to do. It's unfortunate because these kids with ODD [oppositional defiant disorder] or other behavior disorders need help to be in a regular classroom; and with this shortage, untrained people are coming in and they are not receiving the guidance or training to do the job properly.

Sandy added:

> To bring someone in off the street and say 'Sit with this kid for the day' and hope that the child is going to be happy and learn and make progress, I just don't see how that is going to benefit that child. All it is doing is possibly keeping that child quiet for a few minutes while the teacher teaches. I don't see that it is for the child's benefit or in the long run for the classroom teacher's benefit either.

The participants stated that to work with students with severe behavior requires training in behavior management and an understanding of the role of the assistant in the classroom, acquired through either training or experience. Trudy noted that school boards are beginning to "move toward certification" and are requiring assistants either to be certified or to be "working toward your certification in order to be hired. Schools would not think of bringing in a person off the street who just wanted to teach, so why should it be done in our positions?" Gloria added, "I get really frustrated when assistants are placed in classrooms to work with students with high behavioral needs who haven't had training, because this is the child's life."

The participants described the importance of having a trained assistant working with the student with severe behavior disorders in that it can free up the teacher to teach rather than managing the student's behavior. As Gloria stated, "We have large class sizes and kids with behavior disorders without support. Who is suffering? Both the teachers and the kids, because the teacher is spending 95% of her time managing behavior rather than teaching."

Compensation for Non-Student Contact Time

It was suggested by the participants that if schools want to look seriously at some of the reasons that certified assistants are leaving positions with students with severe behavior disorders, they need to look at the funding provided to support assistants in preparing instructional materials and meeting with teachers to plan student programs. Fran stated, "At present the budget is so tight, everyone is working to their absolute maximum, and there just isn't time available to meet." Trudy confirmed this:

> I often spend time on the weekend preparing something for my student. There needs to be planning time allotted to do the things I need to do to make that child's program successful. You can't be pulling things out in the middle of a crisis. We need more prep time, especially with high needs behavior children, because they cannot always be trusted in the classroom, and there needs to be some sort of relief to keep the flow going smoothly in the classroom when you are out.

Educational assistants are typically paid only for instructional days, and when they are assigned to a child with severe behavior, they need time to see the student's profile, to plan with the teacher, and to document. Fran noted, "What and how we record the information in the communication book [for parents] is important."

Some of the participants acknowledged that their school board provides discretionary hours for assistants for professional development activities. However, they emphasized the importance of the assistant being able to determine how he or she will use this time and affirmed that teachers and administrators cannot arbitrarily make this decision for the assistant. Fran said, "We are assigned discretionary hours that we can use for professional development, teacher-parent interviews, to support end of the year activities, etc. Some administrators designate this time for assistants to attend staff meetings."

Trudy commented, "There are some professional development sessions offered by the board that the students would definitely benefit from if both the teacher and the assistant could attend the session together." However, educational assistants are paid for instructional days only, and as Fran confirmed, "There is an average of one professional development day every second month, for which assistants are not paid their wages."

Hiring, Recall, Job Security, and Funding

Several issues were identified by the participants related to hiring, recall, and job security for assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders. Generally, educational assistants are hired for a 10-month contract, are laid off in June, and must be rehired for the following school year. The participants confirmed that hiring assistants is dependent on funding, which is determined by the identified needs of the students attending the school. Trudy stated, "Recall is a problem, because the school can't hire the assistant until the child is registered in the school."

The uncertainty of funding for assistants assigned to students with behavior disorders affects the retention of staff in these positions, because many students with behavior disorders are not identified until late September, when the student's behavior has deteriorated to the point that it is detrimentally affecting the entire class. This practice puts undue pressure on administrators to fill assistant positions as soon as the funding becomes available. By this point in the school year, many assistants with training and/or experience are either hired by other schools or have taken another job in order to have an income. Sandy commented, "Then people without training or experience were hired at the school" because the students needed support in the classroom, "which takes away

from the understanding that an assistant in the position has expertise to offer and that the job requires a high level of skill."

Other issues associated with recall relate to the amount of critical information shared with staff during the first few days of school start-up. Fran noted, "We do not have permanent contracts, and the school board tells us that they will find us a position. However, if the assistant does not start until October or November, that pertinent information has been missed."

Gloria noted that something that made a real difference for assistants at her school was that educational assistant staff with seniority who were laid off in June were given a promise of recall in September. The assistants did not know in which classroom they would be working or the needs of the student(s) to whom they would be assigned, but they had the security of knowing that they had a job in September.

Seniority for assistants within the union was described as a paradox for educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders. Seniority for educational assistants is related to the number of years that the individual has been working with the particular school board. When an assistant works with students with severe behavior disorders and the student leaves the school, the assistant is basically out of a job. In some school districts, if the person has seniority, he or she is able to bump another assistant within that school division who has less seniority. The participants noted that the difficulty associated with this practice is that students with severe behavior disorders need consistency and as Fran stated:

> Sometimes an assistant who has been making good progress with a student is suddenly bumped from their position, and a more senior assistant who may or may not have experience or knowledge related to meeting the needs of the student is reassigned to this position.

Trudy empathized, "When you have to bump someone else within a school, it becomes nasty" because the other assistant is out of a job.

The participants addressed the need for Alberta Learning to look at the way in which the area of special needs is funded. Fran noted, "It takes a long time to get the child coded, so the teacher is going to be dealing with that child long before the funding is available to support the classroom." As a result, as the participants pointed out, there is a need for teacher preparation programs to provide all teachers with training in the area of classroom behavior management strategies.

During the focus group interviews the participants were asked, "If there was one thing that could be changed that would constructively affect everything else in their work, what would it be?" The overwhelming response was *funding*. Gloria pointed to the fact that

> the funding provided from Alberta Learning for a child with special needs does not cover the cost of an assistant to work with that child. There are also supplies required for that child, and teacher costs. There are too many kids in school who don't meet the criteria for funding, and those kids still need help, and the resources for them have to come from somewhere. These kids are just as needy, if not more, but they don't meet the criteria for funding.

The participants felt that more funding could provide the financial resources to hire needed staff. Lack of adequate funding to support students with behavior disorders results in assistants frequently filling in additional, uncompensated time with the student to ameliorate the condition. Sandy said, "I choose not to take my breaks in the morning and supervise my student at noon because I don't want him to be without support and the class and teacher having to cope with his behavior."

Representation on Legal and Ethical Matters

The perception of the lack of job security was prevalent among all of the participants in their descriptions of assistants as "expendable." Their discussion of their lack of job security reflected their concern that if assistants are not working out as expected by teachers or administrators, they are simply replaced.

What continually came through in the interviews is that working with students with severe behaviors is physically and emotionally draining because the students need so much. The participants indicated that they did have support if they were physically unwell. They were asked if they had the same level of support when they felt that they were mentally or emotionally drained. Gloria reported:

> It comes back to the point of why assistants don't want to go to the union. Assistants are always worried about their positions. If I go to my administration and say, "I can't do this," are they going to think this is a weakness? Will they think I can't do my job properly? There is a concern that if I go and describe this situation, are they going to say somehow I'm responsible?

The nature of the practice of educational assistants generally is that they are expected to support students with a wide variance of exceptionality at multiple grade levels. Gloria pointed to a common concern for assistants: "If you are assigned to working with a student with severe behavior and you are not comfortable in the position, it is assumed that the assistant is not good at their job."

When assistants are working in situations in which they are not comfortable and they share their concerns with the teacher, the teacher may or may not listen to their needs. Fran stated, "Many times when assistants are working in questionable situations, they do not feel they can say anything because they need their job." She added:

> If the assistant does go to the principal and the principal does not support their concerns, they have nowhere else to go; and if they are in a remote school location, they often just quit rather than go the school board.

However, Gloria emphasized:

> If you have a child in the class and things aren't going well, you have to go to someone and say "This isn't working." If things aren't working, someone needs to know that things aren't working. Hopefully, administration will listen to you and will do something.

The need for administrative support on professional matters was strongly endorsed by the group. Fran reinforced that

> administrators need to let the assistants know that the lines of communication are open and that their job is not going to be on the line if they come and talk to them. If an assistant is going to succeed in the placement they are in, they have to be able to talk about what's happening if it is not good.

The participants described their need for administrative support on ethical matters related to the classroom and felt that their representation within their union on professional matters is somewhat limited because of their minority status within the union.

Personal Safety

As a result of events that the participants had experienced or witnessed within their work, they identified safety as a major concern in working with students with severe behavior disorders. Gloria stated, "When dealing with violent kids, it's emotionally and physically draining. Safety is a big issue when you are working with these kids."

Fran described the nature of her work as highly demanding in relation to the need for assistants to be continually "encouraging and motivating these students as well as monitoring their behavior, and we need to make sure that we have a safe environment for

our student and the other students in the class." Fran described the results of being a "buffer" between the student with severe behavior and the other students: "There are assistants in the field who have scars on their hands and have gone through terrible bruising from these abusive students." Diane addressed these personal safety concerns as well: "Scratching is nothing compared to what's happening to many assistants."

Gloria observed that "physically restraining a student is extremely difficult, and if it continues, it usually leads to some kind of medical problem; for example, back problems, headaches, muscle strains, a whole range of things happen."

The participants also discussed their need for scheduled time to debrief and document after a major incident has occurred with a student. Fran reported, "You and the student need time away from one another to regroup and be able to start again."

They stressed the need to have a safe environment in which to work and to know that they can contact someone who is in a position to support them. The participants addressed the need to share the responsibility of the student's behavior and to work as a team because all staff need to be willing to physically restrain a student who is physically out of control and endangering oneself or others.

Fran described the benefit to the teacher and the students that occurs when the educational assistant is able to meet the needs of the student with severe behavior disorders and make the classroom a safe place for all learners: "This allows the teacher to spend more time teaching the rest of the students."

What follows are the participants' responses and the corresponding categories that developed into theme 5 in relation to question 2 from the conceptual framework of the study.

Section 2: Research Question 2

What roles and responsibilities do the participating educational assistants associate with their practice?

Theme 5: Personal and Professional Skills Required by Educational Assistants

The participants' responses to this question related to the theme of ***personal and professional skills required by assistants to be effective in their work.*** These personal and professional skills were associated with three general areas: (a) in relation to the student(s) to whom the assistant is assigned, (b) in relation to the classroom teacher(s), and (c) in relation to the position of the educational assistant within the school.

In Relation to the Student(s) to Whom the Assistant is Assigned

The participants in this study agreed that to be effective in their work with students with severe behavior disorders, the educational assistant must demonstrate the personal and professional skills associated with the willingness to (a) work with the student, (b) build the student's self esteem, (c) strengthen the student's attachment to school, (d) build trust and rapport with the student, (e) represent the student, and (f) foster inclusion.

Willingness to work with the student. Fullan (1999) described the moral purpose of education as making a difference in the life chances of all students. The area of greatest satisfaction as described by the participants in this study was their relationship with their students and the chance to make a difference in the lives of their students whom, others had often given up on. They consistently referred to their need to make a difference in the lives of their students and felt that these students with severe behavior

disorders had further to go than their peers to be successful in school because of the nature of their disability.

All of the participants strongly agreed that the educational assistant has to want to work with these students and has to want to be there. Leanne noted that when working with students with severe behavior disorders, assistants must learn not to take the student's behavior personally because the nature of their disability is such that "they are often not eager to have you approach them about assisting them in any way." The participants shared some of their natural fears and the importance of constructively dealing with these fears in order to work with the student. Diane said, "I was a little intimidated at first when I started working with him, but then I took it as a personal challenge. I knew I could help this child; . . . we can do this."

The participants noted that to be successful in their work with students with severe behavior disorders, the assistant has to have an inner desire to establish feelings of trust and security with the student. They identified a significant part of building this relationship with the student as the need to care for the student. Diane emphasized, "Respect him, be someone he can trust, have a sense of humor working with him, and be someone who cares about him."

Willingness to build the student's self-esteem. Throughout the interviews, each of the participants strongly endorsed the idea that school has to be a place where students can feel good about themselves. Trudy noted, "Self-esteem is so important. You can get a lot of the negative behaviors under control when the child's self-esteem grows." Gloria confirmed the benefits of working with these students to build their self-esteem:

> Last year I worked with a student who went from being one of the worst behaved students to one of the best. When others picked on her, her way of retaliating was the behavior. Once she learned that she was a good person and began to believe in herself, . . . the difference was amazing. The behavior sort of just disappeared. She would still have outbursts, . . . but nothing like before.

The participants identified low self-esteem as a major factor associated with the inappropriate behavior of students with behavior disorders. Gloria suggested, "To build self-esteem, we find out what is lacking to create the behaviors we are seeing," and the students' confidence must be increased in order to help them to manage their own behavior.

Willingness to strengthen the student's attachment to school. Fullan (1999) suggested that students who are not performing to their academic potential do not need more pressure to perform academically; rather, they need greater attachment to the school and the intrinsic motivation to want to learn.

Throughout the interviews the participants frequently described the need to support the student to develop the academic, emotional, and social skills necessary to be successful within the school environment. They agreed that students with behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms need structure and routine in order to learn. Because of the nature of the student's disability, this may be done using different methods than those used by the teacher with the majority of the students in the class. Leanne concurred:

> There are days when he outright refuses to work, and I take into consideration that this is his disability. His disability involves defiance and lack of attention, and this work can wait until a better time. There are times when his social well-being has to supersede his academic work.

The participants discussed their need to motivate the student to want to connect to the group in order to help the student with severe behavior disorders to develop a sense of place in the class. They stressed that they helped their students to experience acceptance from their peers by motivating them to adhere to the structure of the class and demonstrate behaviors that contribute to the learning environment. Gloria advised:

> Enforce whatever the consequences were set out to begin with. Talk about it later how the student could have changed it, . . . what they can do differently next time. The student needs to know what's going to happen next, but every child needs to be treated differently.

The participants agreed that different situations within the context of the learning environment require different responses by the assistant. Diane observed:

> There is a time to be firm with the student and a time not to do that. You have to get a sense of the situation and then respond accordingly. They can't walk over you. You have to be there when they need you, but they have to do what they need to do as well. There is a balance.

Willingness to build trust and rapport with the student. The participants stressed the need for assistants to work hard with students with severe behavior disorders to build trust and rapport in order to meet the student's emotional and academic needs. Gloria stated, "I think trust is the number one thing when you are working with behavior kids. Many of them have never been able to trust anybody." Throughout the individual interviews, the participants emphasized that a fundamental way to build rapport with students with behavior disorders is to listen to them and respect whatever they are telling you, because it is important from their point of view even if you do not necessarily want to hear it. Diane said, "You have to give them their space and let them say what they feel. Sometimes it's not what you want to hear, but that's how they feel, and you have to help the student to deal with it." This gives the students a way to work through some of the

issues with which they are dealing and that are contributing to their inappropriate behavior. Gloria stressed the need to build trust with the student: "I think we have to understand that when you are working with these students, you are a lifeline for them."

The participants described the effect of a solid relationship on the student's academic program. Diane said, "I had no problem getting him to do his work. We went through a lot of things together." Gloria also commented:

> It is really important to be able to listen to these kids because until you build that trust, . . . especially with behavior kids, you are not going to go anywhere until they can feel that you are behind them and you are going to support them.

The need to get to know the student was further emphasized in order to target the student's strengths and vulnerabilities or divert a blow-out, which in turn leads to a better day for the student, assistant, teacher, and class. Gloria remarked:

> Once you get to know the student, they begin to trust you, and they begin to open up. I've had kids contemplating suicide, kids who have been abused, and that all comes out if they trust you. That's often the underlying problem of the behavior.

She added:

> They've come through the school system and they started out as little kids, and at that point they started to get labeled as bad kids. They got through school and you get them in junior high. In Grades Five/Six they have been labeled as bad kids, and many times it's not that they are bad kids, it's just that they haven't had an opportunity to find somebody to really trust, . . . to listen to them and stand behind them as they deal with their issues.

The participants described the importance of listening to what the child is saying and trying to understand how the child is feeling. They cautioned that educators cannot change what is happening outside school but that assistants can make school a safe place for children to learn, where the child can feel good about him- or herself.

Willingness to represent the student.

Advocate for the student. Throughout the interviews, the participants expressed a strong need to bring forward their concerns regarding the students with whom they work. They must do this on behalf of the student while at the same time maintaining a professional working relationship with the teacher. They described some of the times when the assistant needs to advocate on behalf of the child if the teacher does not understand the needs of the student. Gloria provided an example:

> As assistants we have to be advocates for these kids, especially if you are working with a teacher who does not have the necessary background and training to understand what the student's needs are or even the child's feelings and the things that are important for these kids. Many teachers have no idea of what they are dealing with.

Gloria noted the assistant's responsibility to advocate for the child: "The assistant is doing a disservice to the child if you see something is not working and you ignore the situation rather than deal with it."

The participants clarified their belief that advocating for a student does not mean getting the student out of work that needs to be done, but rather helping others to understand the needs of the student while helping the student to develop personal responsibility for completing his or her own work. Sandy stated, "It's not that I can get them out of something. I'll see if maybe instead of doing all twelve questions we will do ten questions and talk through the other two. The work still needs to be done."

An underlying concern expressed by the participants was that because of the nature of their disability, students with behavioral disorders can be blamed for actions and events within the learning environment for which they are not responsible. This reinforces the need for assistants to advocate for their student in these situations by

helping other staff members to see the whole picture beyond the isolated incidents that occur. Many times these include actions or words of other students. Fran observed, "Sometimes, yes, the student that I am working with who has severe behavior did hit that other student; but I saw these students antagonize him before the incident." Leanne described the subtlety of these situations:

> The children catch on pretty fast that the student can be a scapegoat for just about anything. When children go home, rather than taking the responsibility for their own actions, they describe how it was this kid's fault. Soon the kids realize that they can blame that student for what happened, and parents will believe them, teachers will believe them, and soon the child doesn't have a chance any more.

This was further reinforced by Gloria:

> That doesn't mean that you are going to be there to get them out of trouble when they are in trouble. It's a fact that these kids are accused of being in trouble, and many times they are not the ones behind it. The assistant needs to be able to stand up to administration or whoever and say, "You know what? This time they are not guilty; this time they were not the cause of it. This is where the cause or the problem is coming from."

The participants noted that if the students feel that the teacher will not listen to them, the assistant must reinforce with the students that the teacher is the authority figure. However, if the assistant believes that what is happening is not right, it is important for the assistant to talk to the teacher. Gloria stressed, "Advocating for the child, supporting them, and letting them know you are there is what builds trust."

Observing, reporting, and documenting. A common observation by the participants throughout the interviews was that because of the nature of the student's disability, when an assistant is working with a student with challenging behavior, particularly beyond Grade 1, progress can be 'painfully slow.' Leanne commented:

> What is frustrating is when you move on to other goals, and then you have a lousy day and the whole thing topples down. He had friends; now he doesn't have friends any more because he beat them up, and you are back to starting at the ground floor again.

The participants felt that documenting information related to the student's daily interactions was one way to address the need to see progress through growth. Fran noted, "What really made me feel good was to look back on my anecdotal notes over the course of a month and see the student's improvement and the specific area of improvement."

Because of the nature of the student's disability, the participants emphasized the need for assistants to accurately record their observations of the student's classroom activity and interactions. They reported that this information is frequently used by the teacher for programming decisions, by the principal for funding decisions, and by outside professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and physicians for medical decisions. Leanne confirmed, "I was asked to write a letter to the student's physician documenting the behaviors we were seeing in the classroom. The physician changed the prescription based on the information I provided."

Willingness to foster inclusion. The participants discussed the importance of helping other students in the class understand the needs of their peer with a behavior disorder in order to become an authentic member of the group. Leanne stated, "We have to create an understanding among the other students that when my child begins to lose it, the other kids are not laughing and pointing at him."

The participants discussed the need to view behavior outbursts as a shared responsibility involving the staff, the student who is losing control, and the other students, because students who have severe behavior disorders are particularly vulnerable to the actions, words, and influence of their peers. Gloria said:

> Nine times out of ten the other kids would say things to get her going, and then all of a sudden she would just blow. As long as you could stop that at the beginning so that the insults never started, she never got to that point.

Working at changing the attitudes of other students toward students with behavior disorders was identified by the participants as a significant part of their job. Leanne said:

> My student has had a whole year of extreme behaviors, and the other kids have ostracized him. He is labeled a bad kid, the kid you can easily get into trouble, because it doesn't take much to get him going. Now his meds are working well, and he is not the entertainment ticket he used to be."

In order to support the child's inclusion into the regular classroom, it is critical for the other students in the class to be able to see the student with behavior disorders achieving academically. Gloria advised, "Set out plans so he can succeed and so that the rest of the kids can see that he is able to succeed."

The participants explained the need to teach the other students to have compassion for and understanding of the needs of students with behavior disorders. Fran suggested teaching the students that

> we are all a part of this classroom, and we help each other in here. If he is having a bad day, then it is up to you to try to do what you would want him to do for you, and that is to try to make you feel better, not to make you feel worse.

This was reinforced by Diane, who advised:

> Yes, and "if you do something to provoke this child and keep it going, then you are going to be in trouble." Some kids love to feed off that, to see how long it will take for him to blow his fuse.

The participants noted that peer acceptance for students with severe behavior disorders is critical because the student's classmates are the ones with whom this student is going to have to go through school. The staff members change, but the other students still have to accept this student. Sandy suggested:

> It is important for my student to get to know the other kids in the class because he can't fit in unless he is accepted. We need to make an effort to include the whole class in activities involving my student rather than me being isolated with that one student."

In Relation to the Classroom Teacher(s)

To be successful in their work with teachers, the participants identified the importance of educational assistants demonstrating the personal and professional skills associated with the ability to (a) support the teacher's classroom management system, (b) help the teacher to understand the role of the educational assistant, and (c) optimize meeting time.

Support the teacher's classroom management system. The participants described the need for assistants to support the teacher's established methods of doing things in the classroom. In classrooms where there is more than one assistant supporting instruction, all the assistants must support the same system within the classroom. This concern was voiced by Sandy: "There can't be six assistants all pulling students and doing their own thing without some guidelines."

The importance of assistants' following the academic plan developed by the teacher, with input from the assistant, was discussed, because as Gloria pointed out, "You can undo a lot of years of hard work in a few short months . . . by someone thinking that "I'm going to do it my way." With these kids you have to do what works, not necessarily what you want."

As well, the participants stressed the need for assistants to be prepared to follow through with the consequences of prescribed behavioral programs for students and not to "dump" this back on the teacher.

Help the teacher to understand the role of the educational assistant. The participants voiced their concerns that teacher education generally does not provide regular classroom teachers with information on how to work effectively with a classroom assistant to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders. As a result, Fran suggested, "If the teacher does not know what to do with the assistant, the assistant needs to initiate the action." The assistant also needs to be open to negotiation of his or her role in relation to the needs of both the teacher and the student.

Classroom teachers have an additional challenge in relation to planning for the assistant around the student's unpredictable behavior. Leanne commented:

> If my student is on task, I get busy with the rest of the class or do something for the teacher. I think, for this position, it is just the uncertainty of each day and each minute that makes planning very difficult."

The participants felt that sometimes teachers assign mundane tasks to assistants because they do not realize the many ways in which the assistant can contribute to the classroom learning environment. In these situations the participants expected the assistant to initiate action. Sandy said, "It's not all the teacher's fault. I think there are a lot of assistants that believe we are there for the kids and would automatically step in and start helping the kids." The participants agreed that if a teacher was assigning inappropriate work to the assistant, the onus is partly on the assistant to do something about it.

Optimize meeting time. Because of the tight limitations on meeting time, educational assistants must be solution focused and very clear about their needs or their students' needs when meeting with teachers. There is insufficient time for the teacher to try to figure out what the assistant requires. Sandy shared, "I organize my thoughts before

we meet and usually just go into a meeting with a couple of points. We normally just deal with them, or I make a point of going back to follow up if we have to."

Within situations in which the teacher does not appear to have time to meet with the assistant, that participants suggested that sometimes it is on the assistant's shoulders to initiate the discussion rather than waiting for the teacher to determine the necessity of a meeting time.

In Relation to the Position of the Educational Assistant Within the School

Several times throughout the interviews the participants referred to the importance of maintaining and demonstrating professional conduct in order to be respected by their colleagues, so that when they are speaking on behalf of the student with whom they work, others will listen to what they have to say. The participants described their position as dynamic and dependent on the classroom context and the practice of the teacher, both of which require a broad range of skills on the part of the assistant to accommodate. They identified several personal and professional skills required by educational assistants that are generally related to their position as the need to:

- adapt and modify learning materials,
- demonstrate personal efficacy,
- maintain composure under duress,
- demonstrate flexibility and adaptability,
- maintain a sense of humor and hope,
- be a life long learner,
- maintain professional confidentiality, and
- build a working relationship with parents.

Adapt and modify learning materials. The participants provided overwhelming support for students with severe behavior disorders to be working on authentic academic material at their developmental level and the need to adapt these materials in order for the student to experience success. Gloria acknowledged:

> It takes time to learn how much help each student needs and to what degree, because so many of these kids just shut down, saying, "Can't do it, . . . not doing it. . . . That's it; . . . finished. . . . I'm leaving" the minute the answer is not right there. If the assistant can intervene early and just give them that first step, the student can often go on from there.

Adapting learning materials is a large part of the assistant's job, and the starting point is identifying what the child can handle. Gloria suggested, "For example, for some kids to throw a whole page of a math quiz at them is bombarding them. By giving that child half that page, for them to show they can do it, then give the other half."

In an inclusive classroom setting many times a major goal for students with severe behavior disorders is, as Sandy stated, "to be able to attend school all day and be in the classroom as much as possible."

The participants discussed the importance of addressing the social/emotional needs of the students in addition to their academic needs. Gloria maintained, "They don't know how to deal with conflict, how to be compassionate; they don't know how to do so many of the basic things. It is easy to teach these skills when they are incorporated into the daily planning."

Demonstrate personal efficacy. Personal efficacy is an individual's belief that his or her work will make a difference; it is related to being optimistic, confident, and knowledgeable that one's efforts can produce results. Efficacious people have an internal locus of control, know they have the capacity to make a difference, and are willing and

able to do so (Bandura, 1997; Caine & Caine, 1997b; Costa & Garmston, 2002; Costa & Liebmann, 1997; Tice, 1995). Throughout the interviews the participants consistently referred to the personal skills associated with high self-efficacy that are required of assistants who successfully work with students with severe behavior disorders.

The participants described the inner strength needed by assistants working with these students because when students with severe behavior disorders have a bad day, it is a very public event. The incidents that occur during these days may or may not affect other staff, students, or classes in the school- but by the end of the day most people within the building know there has been a major incident. Leanne stated, "It requires personal strength on the part of the assistant working with the student to swallow what happened and move on, because everybody knows." The participants noted that, for the most part, assistants who work with students who have special needs other than behavior disorders do not experience a very public demonstration when things go awry. Staff members or students in the school can make inaccurate assumptions about the assistant's work with the student with behavior disorders. As Leanne pointed out:

> If you are working in an early literacy program and you are having a bad day, it's you and the child, and most of the time the child does not even know that together you had a bad day. But when you are with a child with severe behavior, it becomes a big public event when you have a bad day. As my administrator commented, "You have a bad day, and everyone in the school knows it."

Part of this concept of self-efficacy was described as a willingness to advocate on behalf of oneself when necessary. The participants referred to the need for assistants to be willing to ask questions when they are unsure of something. Sandy remarked that the "assistant needs to be willing to ask questions when they are not sure about something. There are many things that I do not know, but when it is important or a situation comes

up, I ask." Throughout the interviews the participants' responses demonstrated that they had a high tolerance for inappropriate behavior. Therefore, when assistants who are working with students with severe behavior disorders indicate that they have a need, a concern, or a question, it would be in the teacher's best interest to listen.

Trudy described the value of experience to both the student and the assistant within this position: "When you are new to the position, you do the behavioral management; when you gain experience, you move beyond that to make an improvement in the child's education, not just manage the child's behavior." This concept of moving beyond managing behavior to actually meeting the child's educational needs was further referred to through discussions of their skill in the art of "reading" the classroom context and anticipating the behavior of the student within the situation. The participants referred to the development of this skill as an intuitive process, learned through a combination of experience and natural ability. They described this skill as being related to the assistant's ability to understand the complex nature of the classroom, combined with a deep appreciation of the needs of the student.

According to the participants, additional skills that assistants need to demonstrate in these positions include being observant by identifying triggers before the student reacts, being perceptive by anticipating events before they occur, being open and communicative with the student and staff, being a positive role model for students, being consistent in dealing with the student, and being compassionate.

Maintain composure under duress. Throughout the individual interviews each of the participants described the importance of seeing beyond the behavior to the child as a person with emotional, behavioral, social, and academic needs and therefore not taking

what the child says or does personally. However, the participants agreed that it is easy to say this but that it takes inner strength and focused attention to actually do this when one is being tested by the student. As well, there will be times when the student's actions or words will bother even experienced assistants. Gloria remembered one occasion when "I came into work, and this child had this plasticine body stuck full of pins sitting on my desk. It bothered me." As Leanne observed, "You can be very strong emotionally and still have a bad day with your student."

The participants emphasized the need for assistants to reduce the stress of highly volatile situations by monitoring their own reactions and maintaining their composure during these times for safety reasons. As they noted, when they work with students with behavior disorders, there are many times when the student is emotionally highly charged. Gloria suggested:

> One of the things is to always remain calm, so that it doesn't matter how escalated the student's behavior is, the assistant needs to manage to stay calm, at least on the outside. The presentation they are getting is that you are really calm about this; it makes a difference so that they don't bolt for the rest of the kids. Usually after an incident, the student is pretty upset that they lost it.

Each of the participants described the need to separate the child from the child's behavior. They continued to see the potential for improvement within the child although what the child had just said or done was completely unacceptable. They emphasized that the students do not want to behave inappropriately and that the students need to learn acceptable ways of behaving within the context of the regular classroom environment.

Demonstrate flexibility and adaptability. The ability to accommodate change by demonstrating a flexible and adaptable approach to the varied demands of their positions appeared as a consistent pattern throughout the interviews. The participants

acknowledged that these complementary skills help assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders to address the needs of the student and to cope with the multiplicity of tasks expected of individuals working in this position. Leanne described the nature of her work: "It's not easily defined, because I find that it goes from extremes."

Because of funding restrictions, the nature of the job requires that assistants often support students within more than one classroom, which requires that the assistant be knowledgeable about differences in student developmental levels as well as curriculum needs. Diane said, "I love the variety in my job; for example, from working with this student with severe behavior in junior high to working with the primary class is quite an adjustment." Leanne commented on the challenges related to the uncertainty of the plan for the day and the need to accommodate change on a regular basis:

> If I were working with kids with learning disabilities or developmental delays, the teacher and I could plan the day and activities, and I could implement strategies throughout the day related to the student's disability. With my student it's really different. We may know at 9:00 a.m. in the morning that it is going to be a bad day. We know then that we can't go with the planned course of action for the day. Then I change classrooms in the afternoon.

Maintain a sense of humor and hope. Throughout the interviews the participants consistently referred to their inner belief that tomorrow can be better and that the student has potential yet to be developed. Leanne responded:

> So when you ask, "What brings me back each day?" it's the hope of things being a little bit better. I've got a responsibility, and if it's a terrible week, you just have to get through this week and maybe next week will be better.

The participants continually revisited their notion of belief in the student and that through their personal sustained effort, they could make a difference in the life of the

student. Gloria reflected, "There is goodness inside each child. It is a matter of finding what you need to bring it out." Each participant described her ability to see beyond the student's behavior to who the student was as a person with needs, hopes, aspirations, and possibilities.

Accepting the student's academic ability and level of achievement, as well as the student's behavior, and starting the intervention plan at this point are important. The participants also emphasized the importance of viewing the student's inappropriate behavior as a challenge while believing that the student's behavior or the situation can improve. Sandy confirmed:

> You have to accept the child exactly where they are and expect them to improve, and then set it up so that they can improve. Last fall I was going home with a lot of bruises. I really and truly believed down deep that it was going to change the next day or the day after or soon.

The participants acknowledged that progress with students with severe behavior can be painfully slow, and many times setbacks will occur. Diane observed, "You move there quicker the next time, and every time that happens, you move a little further than you did before, and the incidents become fewer."

The participants frequently referred to the need to enjoy working with the students and the need to have a sense of humor. Trudy advised, "If you don't, you are never going to survive." Autry (1991) confirmed that working together can and should be fun; if it is not, he suggested, we are wasting far too much of our lives on it.

Be a lifelong learner. Each participant clearly articulated her needs related to ongoing professional development, which they saw as a necessity in order to maintain their positions. They also saw their learning opportunities as a strong model for the students with whom they were working and seemed to feel that there was always

something more that could be learned in dealing with the students. Gloria commented, "It shows that you are interested in doing something, in bettering yourself. We are working in learning institutions; we should be demonstrating that we are interested in learning ourselves." The participants endorsed the importance of assistants taking the initiative to seek out training rather than waiting for someone to recommend it. Fran confirmed, "I need to be able to keep my ongoing professional development current by attending workshops and reading new material related to working with students with severe behavior." Sandy added,

> Whenever I find a course that may be good, I go and take it. Before making plans for my professional development, I see my first responsibility is to ensure that the kids that I work with are covered. Then as long as my administration approves the process, I will go anywhere to learn something that will truly make a difference.

The participants described their varied needs in relation to their professional development plans, which reflects the broad range of skills needed by assistants working in these positions. Throughout the interviews, their descriptions of their students' academic and emotional needs reflected that these two areas are intimately entwined; one cannot be addressed without the other being affected, and both need to be addressed if the student is to succeed in life. Gloria said, "Next year, I want to do a suicide prevention course, because you always run into that when you are working with junior high students."

The participants stressed the need for postsecondary institutions to offer coursework at a time that is convenient for assistants who are working in the field to access the training.

Maintain professional confidentiality. The participants emphasized their need to have access to student files in order to utilize the information contained within them.

The benefits of working as a team were described as the value of having another adult in the classroom to discuss ideas or concerns. Diane mentioned that "you can share information with and you can trust that it is not going to go anywhere. We all have bad days; things happen." Fran reinforced this type of support: "Sometimes a teacher just needs someone to discuss a delicate issue with, and they know I keep information in confidence."

Build a working relationship with parents. Assistants who work with students with severe behavior disorders in inclusive classrooms are most likely to spend more time, directly or indirectly, with that student than are any other staff members in the school; as a result, the assistant frequently has significant contact with the student's family. Throughout the interviews the participants stressed the importance of building a working relationship with the parents of the child with whom the assistant is working. Gloria stated:

> The assistant needs to try to establish a good relationship with parents, and sometimes it just doesn't happen. It's a trust issue, if parents feel you can be trusted and that you have the knowledge required for working with their child. Usually if the child is coming home saying, "I did this or that," "I like this or that." The parent sees that the child is feeling comfortable and is doing well in that situation and is usually more responsive to you as opposed to "I hate this person."

Trudy discussed the importance of building a relationship with parents so that they will support program modifications for their child:

> When we adapt academic materials, we need parent support, and some parents will not support this approach. I sometimes hear parents say, "Why can't he do what everyone else does in the classroom? If he is having a problem, teach him."

The response from Gloria to this challenge was, "It's, again, advocating for your student. The assistant and teacher need to share with the parent what needs to happen and what the results may be if it doesn't happen."

There are times that parents within the broader school community influence the placement of a child with severe behavior disorders in that when a child's behavior is deemed extreme from the perspective of parents of other children in the class, these other parents do not want the child in that classroom. Sometimes it is a struggle to have the child included in the regular classroom. These differences in perspectives create situations in which competing needs must be addressed, as Fran believed: "The school needs to provide a program for the child, and the parents of this student need to be listened to as well."

Sandy offered specific examples of the benefits of working with parents:

> For example, we may find at school, the child likes chocolate. If the parents don't want the child to have chocolate, we can't use this as a reinforcement. We may have some of their favorite games here, and the child may not have the vocabulary to tell us this information. There may be negative things that will set the child off that we can avoid if we know from the parent ahead of time. As partners in the learning process, parents can be a resource for information related to the child the assistant is working with.

The participants also shared some of their experiences related to working with difficult parents who they felt still had a lot to offer. According to Sandy:

> We need to really value these parents because we go home at the end of the day. We have been here for possibly six difficult hours, but we still have people to relieve us if we need some relief, pat us on the back. . . . These parents don't have that. These parents deal with the child the other eighteen hours a day and on the weekends. They may be a single parent with several children and with financial concerns. Each situation is different, and I think we can help one another because we are there for their child. We are not there to keep the parents happy, but we have to find a way to work together for the benefit of the child. The more positive the working relationship, the better it is for the child.

Chapter Summary

This chapter summary presents an overview of the participants' responses in relation to the two foundational questions framing the study: *What do the participating educational assistants need in order to be effective in their practice?* and *What roles and responsibilities do participating educational assistants associate with their practice?* In relation to the first question, the participants identified their greatest area of need as being in relation to issues of employment, particularly in the areas of hiring, recall, job security, safety, and training. The participants outlined issues related to their position from their perspectives and provided suggestions for possible solutions to these challenges.

The participants unanimously reported their need for their position to be valued and supported by the teachers with whom they work and their school administrators. They identified two areas of importance within their practice as related to the teachers with whom they work: the teacher's knowledge and the teacher's classroom leadership. Focused discussion in the area of teacher knowledge addressed the need for teachers to understand the complex role of the educational assistant and to understand the academic, social, and emotional needs of students with severe behavior disorders. Discussion around the teacher's classroom leadership focused mainly on supervisory issues and the provision of functional support for their work within the classroom.

The participants in the study also identified their need for support for their position from the school administrative staff. These discussions centered mainly on the multiple effects of school management and educational leadership on their practice.

Focused participant discussion around the second research question provided information outlining the participants' insightful views of their practice in relation to the

students and teachers with whom they work and their personal responsibilities to their position within the school. It is this personal and professional skills aspect of the research study that has the greatest potential to resonate with other practitioners in the field employed as educational assistants.

Throughout the interviews the participants' conversations continually referred to their need to be included, listened to, and recognized for their contribution.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The major purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions held by educational assistants of the nature of their practice with students who have severe behavior disorders and who are educated within inclusive classrooms. Chapter Four presented analysis of the participants' responses from the individual and focus group interviews.

Chapter Five presents my interpretation of the participants' responses to the two questions that form the conceptual framework of this study, as presented in Chapter Four. The individual responses from each of the six participants demonstrated common patterns that were combined to form categories. From my interpretation of the data within these categories of patterned responses, five themes emerged: the teacher's knowledge, the teacher's classroom leadership, the required administrative support, the issues related to terms and conditions of employment, and the personal and professional skills required by educational assistants. From these five themes I have synthesized the information into the following four findings of the study: (a) the teachers' and administrators' understanding of the work of educational assistants, (b) the educational assistants' relationships with staff and students, (c) the expanded role of educational assistants, and (d) the need for educational assistants to access essential information. In this chapter each finding is discussed in relation to what educational assistants identified as their needs in order to be effective in their work. The interpretive account focuses on the participants' responses regarding their perceptions of their practice in relation to the staff with whom they work,

the students with whom they work, the conditions under which they work, and their professional responsibilities as educational assistants.

What follows are my interpretations of the findings of the study related to the five themes that evolved from the data.

The Teachers' and Administrators' Understanding of the Work of Educational Assistants

The roles of the teacher and the educational assistant are highly interrelated, and the educational assistants in this study strongly believed that to work together effectively to meet the needs of students with behavior disorders requires that the teacher and the school administrator understand, value, and support the educational assistant's position in the classroom and in the school. The participants' responses underscored the importance of teachers' and administrators' understanding of: the complexity of the educational assistant's position, the importance of valuing colleagues, the effect of the teacher's perception of the assistant's position, the importance of valuing diversity of perspective, and the value of committed staff members.

The Complexity of the Educational Assistant's Position

Comments made by participants throughout the interviews consistently referred to the need for their position to be valued within the education system. "Value me within the school community and give me support to do my job" was a common response.

Before the position of educational assistants can be valued and supported, assistants must be understood by those who work most closely with them in supporting students with severe behavior disorders. The participants' responses throughout the five

themes reflect the fact that the assistant's practice is highly dependent on the teacher's understanding and support of the assistant's role. The participants in this study overwhelmingly stated that there is a general lack of understanding by many teachers, administrators, and parents as to the nature and complexity of the assistant's job. The participants agreed that this lack of understanding is not an intentional omission, but neither is it due to a single cause that can quickly be remedied. The major factors that have contributed to the ambiguity associated with the practice of educational assistants include the lack of understanding about the policies of Alberta Learning that mandate inclusive education practices within classrooms, the lack of standards of training for educational assistants, the lack of teacher preparation in the area of working with educational assistants to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, and the lack of adequate funding to consistently support assistants working in these positions.

The participants confirmed the need for their position to be valued by the student, the teacher, other students in the class, the school administrators, and the student's parents. They suggested that teachers could demonstrate the value they place on the work of assistants by doing the following things:

- setting a tone in the classroom that demonstrates to all students that the teacher values the practice of the assistant;
- asking the assistant for input into the student's IPP;
- supporting decisions made by the assistant in relation to the student's behavior;
- trusting the assistant's judgment;

- inviting the assistant to meetings related to the student(s) with whom he or she works;
- meeting with the assistant to share classroom expectations, student program adaptations, and direction;
- seeking to understand the practice of assistants and the needs of students with severe behavior disorders; and
- sharing classroom-related concerns and information in a timely manner.

Suggestions made by the participants relating to how administrators could support their work include:

- instilling among staff the belief that the program for the student with severe behavior disorders is a shared responsibility;
- setting a tone in the school that indicates that assistants are valued staff members;
- providing annual performance evaluations to enable the assistants to know how they are doing;
- allowing assistants to access information related to the student(s) with whom they work, and providing access to information related to their job within the school; for example, being included in staff meetings;
- developing joint meeting time for classroom teams and time for assistants to adapt learning activities or document information related to the student's program;

- designing position assignments to enable assistants to have a break and work with other students during the day in addition to working with students with severe behavior disorders;
- providing orientation to the school and to the specific educational assistant position for assistants who are new to the school;
- supporting assistants in accessing professional development activities; and
- creating the opportunity for assistants to access support on ethical issues.

Chamchuk (1973) stated that the ATA did not want to provide "aides" with associate membership in the organization and at that time felt that the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) would want to offer "aides" membership in their union. Since the early 1970s many assistants have become members of CUPE, and although the union represents assistants in matters related to hours of work, most assistants are poorly represented on ethical issues related to their practice.

Understanding the complexity of the role of the educational assistant who is supporting students with severe behavior disorders in the classroom can help teachers and administrators see the value of the role and provide the support required for educational assistants to do their job effectively.

The Importance of Valuing Colleagues

The benefits associated with valuing employees are transferable across the fields of business, health, government, and education, to name a few. Business leaders have realized that valuing employees is not only morally right but also good practice, because the benefit of treating people as if they matter significantly affects the outcomes for the organization. Just as careers are the work of adults, school is the work of children, and in

many ways what happens within a school environment is similar to what happens within a business environment.

Senge (1997) discussed what educators can learn from other cultures in how they view business. The oldest Swedish term for business is *narings liv,* which means "nourishment for life," and the ancient Chinese characters for business translate into "life meaning." It is important for teachers and administrators who are working with educational assistants to understand what others have known for a long time—"that working together can indeed be a deep source of life meaning. Anything less is just a job" (p. xi). Melrose (1998) maintained that individuals work to their potential when they are allowed to perform and that the best performance comes from those who are inspired, motivated, and committed to the purpose, and recognized for their part in actualizing the purpose. Cashman (1998), Helgesen (1995), and Shenkman (1996) confirmed that people need to make decisions within their work, feel that they personally make a difference, and at the end of the day know that they have done something meaningful. When workers feel that what they do really counts, they spare no amount of attention, awareness, and sensitivity in their effort. Helgesen (1995) suggested that if we want people to be creative problem solvers, we need to provide an environment that inspires and motivates them to think. To think creatively, people need to feel valued and have a sense of ownership of their work in order to fully develop their talents.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1993) studies revealed that what we value about our lives as human beings is that we have the capability to grow and change and become more constructive, capable, and compassionate people. Shenkman (1996) noted that committed workers expect to grow within their position, which sometimes requires staff to give up

their own narrow, ego-driven desires with the intent of accomplishing something larger as a group. Enjoying work is a core value, and most people care about their workplace relationships, seek the opportunity to fulfill their potential, and want a chance to learn and improve their skills through their work (Gallwey, 2000). Lewin and Regine (2001) related these needs to social capital, which is perceived as serving the greater good, and they emphasized that "most people naturally want to be part of their organization, want to know the organization's purpose, and want to make a difference" (p. 15). The authors went on to say that when a collective understanding of values and purpose is realized, questions of motivation and productivity become irrelevant, because people know what to do and do it. Kouzes and Posner (1995) maintained that getting extraordinary things done in the organization must be everyone's business. Shenkman (1996) noted that when employees feel that their contribution is valued, they readily apply themselves to do their best. In these situations one's work has meaning; it is challenging and calls for one's particular contribution, participation, and talents, which enhances intrinsic motivation for one's work.

The participants in this study made explicit their tacit knowledge of the moments within their practice that held significant meaning for them, and they consistently referred to the times that they felt valued for their work, those times when they had made a difference in the lives of their students and made a positive contribution to the classroom. They asserted that to feel valued in the school, they needed to be included as authentic staff members within the classroom and the school. When we value those with whom we work, we support one another through our actions; that is, we provide assistants with access to information and include them in decisions and problem solving related to their

positions, and set a tone for all students to accept and value the assistant's presence within the classroom. A challenge for school boards is to demonstrate their support for teachers and assistants in inclusive classrooms so that the staff can collectively serve the emerging needs of students with severe behavior disorders.

The Effect of the Teacher's Perception of the Educational Assistant's Position

Melrose (1998) suggested that what motivates or demotivates employees most, what has the greatest impact on individual performance and attitude, is the attitude of their supervisor. This attitude is referred to by Meyers (1987) as a favorable or unfavorable evaluative reaction toward an object or person and is demonstrated through one's beliefs, feelings, or intended behavior. Research in the social sciences has established that attitudes can bias the interpretation and judgment of information relevant to the context of the situation (Caretta & Moreland, 1982; Fazio & Williams, 1986; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979; Regan, Straus, & Fazio, 1974). Meyers (1987) expanded this concept by describing attitude as the general tendency of an individual to act by either doing something or saying something in a certain way under special conditions. The core of a teacher's attitude is formed by these individual beliefs and values, which act as a screen to filter the events that occur within the classroom. Because we usually do not allow information that is inconsistent with our beliefs to seep through our filters, the classroom teacher's tendency to act or react positively or negatively to the practice of the educational assistant is a demonstration of the teacher's values and beliefs associated with the teacher's paradigm of the practice of educational assistants. This paradigm is rooted in the teacher's experiential background and training (Cirocco, 2001). The participants in this study acknowledged that teachers who have had a negative working

experience with an assistant in the past later tend to have a more negative attitude towards the value of an educational assistant within their classroom that may detrimentally affect the assistant's ability to do his or her job effectively.

When considering the importance of the teacher's perception of the role of the educational assistant in the classroom, we can learn from Kanter's (1977) studies of the impact on the 'anointed' in organizations where these individuals were given opportunities through the manager's willingness to provide them with more resources and endow their ideas and words with more credibility because of the manager's desire to support them as winners. The managers expected these workers to succeed, and the manager's perceptions of the worker confirmed this inner belief.

Wheatley (1992) described workers as "bundles of potential" who are too often locked into jobs that do not provide them with the opportunity to display their many potentials (p. 34). The teacher's perception of the educational assistant's role in the classroom determines how, and to what extent, the assistant will be able to contribute to learning outcomes for students. Teachers who include the assistant in planning the student's program by asking for input and support the assistant's decisions in relation to assigned areas of responsibility for the student's program create opportunities for educational assistants to demonstrate their initiative and problem-solving skills. Now more than ever, educational assistants who can demonstrate these skills in the context of the classroom are needed to support teachers in dealing effectively with the many challenges that classroom staff face on a daily basis.

The Importance of Valuing Diversity of Perspective

The complexity of the assistant's position needs to be understood and the value of diversity of perspective needs to be appreciated in order for assistants to develop the commitment required to do the job. What sometimes holds teachers back from working with educational assistants as full team members is that the teachers may perceive differing perspectives in the classroom as a source of conflict rather than valuing these differences as a source of creative and enhanced contribution. For teachers and assistants to work collaboratively in the classroom to meet the needs of all students, the teacher must value diversity of perspective. Based on our experiences and our tacit knowledge, we come to know the world differently. Individual characteristics, life circumstances, and background experiences combine to make each of us different. Whenever two or more people work together, there will be differences in world view. The participants in the study acknowledged the reality of differences in world view among teachers and the need to share this information with one another in order to increase understanding and respect for one another. McKenzie (1991) described *world view* as a personal interpretive understanding of the world that is based on one's experience. It is a process, and each new experience is organized and interpreted, and either accepted or rejected in relation to one's existing world view. Many successful companies such as Microsoft, 3-M, and Tom's of Maine know the value of and actively seek to hire for diversity of world view among employees. The CEO of Tom's of Maine commented that they have learned that hiring for differences in education, experience, background, and abilities among employees is a major business advantage (Chappell, 1993).

Those with whom we work often look at the world from an entirely different angle, which can be a source of creativity and growth if we can allow ourselves to be open to the differences in perspective. Wenger et al. (2002) supported the value of people with diverse perspectives working together when they pointed out that it often takes an outside perspective to help members of a group see the possibilities. Resnick (1991) felt that the diversity of members within a group enhances the potential for novelty and creativity to emerge when individuals bring differing attributes to the classroom team. Healthy work groups move from accepting differences to integrating them into their work. Erickson (1980) described 'growing up' as a means of dealing with the natural conflicts in life and taking on an identity of our own while those around us take on one of their own, often quite different than ours. If we avoid or repress these competing world views, we do not grow. Bateson (1979) discussed how we come to know ourselves and each other through our differences, as our unique skills and perspectives blend with our experiences and relationships to continuously shape who we are becoming. Teachers and assistants working together have the potential to help one another grow through their appreciation of their diversity.

Hanson (1997) observed that competing world views are a natural part of our relationships. When we perceive competing world views as win-lose situations, we feel threatened—that is, if I agree with your perspective, my perspective is wrong or becomes diminished. Hanson maintained that as we begin to trust one another, we can move to being part of a greater whole without losing our unique identities. We need to change these assumptions and value diversity of perspective as an opportunity to learn, gain new insight, and grow into our potential as healthy individuals and group members. In his

studies of groups, Hackman (1990) found that diversity of group composition led to new learning, whereas groups of like members had little to learn from one another. As educators prepare students to live and work in a global economy, we need to demonstrate the value of diversity in the classroom in order to teach students to be accountable to a larger society. By not limiting ourselves to a single view but welcoming differences, we can live full, more holistic lives. Classroom staff working together to share their differing perspectives to generate a multiplicity of creative ideas to solve problems provides stronger support to all students in the class than individual staff members could have generated working alone.

Inclusive educational practice is based on a philosophy of valuing diversity. The participants emphasized the importance of teachers' believing that students with severe behavior disorders belong in the classroom with their peers. The participants shared their common belief that not only did their students with behavioral challenges benefit from being included in the regular classroom, but the other students benefited as well.

Leedy (1997) summed up the value of diversity of perspectives as he described how different approaches help us to know and understand different things about the world. Valuing the work of assistants who support students with severe behavior disorders and valuing diversity of individual staff contribution to the classroom combine to enhance the assistants' commitment to their position.

The Value of Committed Staff Members

Commitment provides the focus and energy to do whatever it takes to accomplish a mutually determined goal; it must be freely given and cannot be required or mandated (Shenkman, 1996). Drummond (2000), Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982), Mathieu and

Zajac (1990), and Meyer and Allen (1997) suggested that employee commitment is related to how valued one feels within one's work and is enhanced when organizations can provide job challenge, participation in decision making, opportunities to experience feelings of personal importance to the organization, and fulfillment of expectations. The participants in this study clearly articulated their belief that if the educational assistant is committed to making a difference in the life of the child with whom he or she works, the rest of the required skills, attitudes, and beliefs will develop or will be enhanced. However, the participants also emphasized that without this personal passion of wanting to work with the student, no amount of training will suffice.

The data from the interviews within this study clearly reflect the depth of the participants' commitment to the students and teachers with whom they worked. Their descriptions reflect that they really care about the needs, the fears, the problems, the hopes, and the successes of the students with whom they work, as well as the health and well-being of the teachers with whom they work. They see themselves as not only making academic information meaningful to their students, but also positively influencing and changing the child's negative perception of him- or herself, which the participants view as having a deleterious effect on the child's academic performance. Their work influences not only the way the child perceives him- or herself, but also, just as important, how the child's peers view him or her.

The participants in this study also described their strong commitment to their position, which develops through their connections to the students with whom they work and through their willingness to continue to work with a student who has demonstrated disrespectful, inappropriate, often dangerous behavior. Their descriptions reflected their

ability to see beyond the student's behavior to their greater purpose of working with a vulnerable child with academic, emotional, and social needs. The participants described times within their practice when they had actually stayed with a child with severe behavior longer than they should have, to their own detriment, because they felt that there was no one else available to meet that child's needs. Data from participants' responses in this study are similar to those in organizational research conducted by Cook and Wall (1980), Drummond (2000), Meyer and Allen (1997), and Mowday et al. (1982), who affirmed that committed employees benefit organizations by their commitment to stay with the organization through tough times, their willingness to exert high levels of personal effort on behalf of the organization, and their belief in the values and goals of the organization. Mathieu and Zajac (1990) found that employees were more likely to stay with an organization if they felt competent, were recognized for their contribution, and were allowed to do a good job.

One does not suddenly arrive at a point of being an effective educational assistant. Rather, one becomes effective through a process that requires training, ongoing personal commitment on the part of the assistant, and support from teachers and school administrators. To provide this support, the assistant needs to form working relationships with the student to whom they are assigned and his or her parents/caregivers, with the classroom teacher, with the other students in the classroom, and with the school administration, within the context of the learning environment.

The Educational Assistant's Relationships with Staff and Students

My interpretation of the data connected to this finding is focused in the following four general areas: the importance of building relationships, the importance of building trust, the need for an ethic of caring, and the need to be connected.

The Importance of Building Relationships

The participants in this study confirmed the need for teachers and assistants to build strong working relationships in order to meet the needs of students who have behavior disorders. Assigning an educational assistant to an inclusive classroom to support students with severe behavior disorders is a necessary first step in the amelioration process. However, it is the manner in which the teacher and the assistant interact and how the assistant relates to both the student with severe behavior disorders and the other students in the classroom that strongly influence the learning process, not the number of staff members or their proximity to the classroom. Understanding how these relationships are enhancing or restricting one another can potentially affect the contribution of the educational assistant to the classroom.

Csikszentmihalyi (1993) proposed that we come to know and define ourselves through our relationships. Our sense of self is continually shaped by that to which we pay attention and that to which we fail to pay attention. Wheatley and Kellnor-Rogers (1996) furthered this concept of the effect of others on our personal development and growth by suggesting that we live in a relational world and that our "relationships change us, reveal us, and evoke more from us" (p. 67). Hanson (1997) supported this idea and described how the self develops in relation to significant others and continues to be shaped by relationships throughout life. Hanson noted that we as humans are defined by our

relationships and that every time we relate to someone or something, we risk being changed. It is this risk that Hanson believed makes us hesitant to open ourselves to others within work relationships. Hanson maintained that the self is enriched through work relationships because we become more complex selves in the process of relating to others. Bettelheim (1960) supported this concept and suggested that in order to develop a strong self, individuals need a strong connection to others by building relationships.

The participants' responses from the interviews in this research suggest that a strong sense of moral purpose can be nurtured in classrooms when teachers and educational assistants are viewed as essential partners, each sharing influence and responsibility in different ways for student learning outcomes. A strong relationship can mobilize classroom staff to share actions, beliefs, and values within an open environment of trust and affirmation. School staff become inventive and creative when talented people have opportunities to work together to share their expertise within a supportive environment of collegiality, caring, and respect (Elmore & Burney, 1999; Fullan, 2001). These healthy relationships encourage participation, ownership, and commitment. It is this high level of personal commitment on the part of the assistants working in these positions with students with behavior disorders that needs to be recognized and supported by teachers and administrators because of its significant potential for positive contribution to the workplace.

Sergiovanni (1994) believed that it is through the quality and character of relationships that values, beliefs, and norms surface. In reported outcomes of various school-improvement projects, relationships were identified as the critical leverage point

for school improvement in that, as the relationships go, so goes the school (Institute for Education and Transformation, 1992).

Educators can learn from a shift that is taking place in the world of business, where valuing people and their work relationships is not just a good or espoused idea, but also a conscious management action. CEOs of several organizations reported to Lewin and Regine (2001) that to be successful in the current business environment, a collective effort is required by all members of the organization, combined with a demonstrated need for one another. The authors reported that business leaders are beginning to realize the benefits to their economic bottom line when they start to genuinely care about their people in the workplace and focus on the need to build healthy relationships. Lewin and Regine proposed that the emergence of the cornerstones of organizational success—creativity, productivity, and innovation—depends on how individuals interact and the kinds of relationships they form with one another.

Goerner (1994), describing research from thermodynamics, confirmed that the energy required to get things done within an organization cannot be created or destroyed, but rather that it is transformed from one state to another. Garmston and Wellman (1997) suggest that for schools "the power to get things done comes from relationships which produce the energy" (p. 116). For classroom staff to transform their collective creative energies into that which is required to meet the needs of students, administrators need to realize that the potential for this energy cannot be confined to specific tasks, functions, or levels. Wheatley (1992) noted that in living systems it is not so much who or what position will take care of the problem, but rather what energy, skill, influence, and wisdom are available to contribute to a solution. To develop naturally, this energy needs

to flow through the school. Networks of relationships begin to take form when classroom staff have opportunities to interact with one another and relevant information is identified, interpreted, and transformed into solutions for the challenges they face. In realizing that information is associative, networked, and heuristic, we are able to see the importance of relationships and nonlinear connections as the source of new knowledge (Wheatley, 1992). Fullan (2001) suggested that sharing data within schools without relationships merely causes more information glut, to which people do not pay attention. Fullan confirmed that turning classroom information into knowledge is a social process, and for that one needs good relationships because "people will not voluntarily share knowledge unless they feel some moral commitment to do so" (p. 6). Participants in this study confirmed their need for the teachers with whom they work to share openly from their teaching expertise and provide information related to the assistants' work in the classroom for assistants to do their job effectively. Healthy relationships between teachers and assistants in the classroom transform the energy associated with good ideas into the capacity for staff to act on these ideas to benefit students (Garmston & Wellman, 1997; Wheatley, 1992).

Lewin and Regine (2001) affirmed that caring and connected relationships form the basis of adaptability, innovation, and productivity among employees and are critical to the success of classroom teams. If school administrators can acknowledge educational assistants as potential contributors of classroom energy rather than in terms of the assistant's hierarchical relationship with the teacher, then administrators will realize the kinds of resources required to support the assistant and to transform this potential energy

into supporting the teacher in order to achieve student learning outcomes in the classroom.

The Importance of Building Trust

Costa and Garmston (2002) described *trust* as an essential ingredient for workplace relationships that is based on a belief in, and reliance on, another person. They advised that it takes time to develop. To support a colleague, one has to trust that person by clarifying one's intent, which is something that, through time, unfolds in layers (Peppers & Briskin, 2000). Arrien (1993) refers to trust as being comfortable with uncertainty and points to the fundamental need for trust to be developed among colleagues by describing it as the container out of which grow the qualities of wisdom: clarity, objectivity, and discernment. Secretan (1996) emphasized the need for administrators to recognize the universal desire of people to be trusted and respected. Marcic (1997) noted that without trust, other virtues or good behaviors become meaningless; when trust is broken in the workplace, the other virtues are lost.

As the president of Tom's of Maine described, relationships are built on trust, and our sense of being comes from a sense of relation to others within a web of interrelationships, not from the rugged, self-reliant individuality concept often promoted by the Western world (Chappell, 1993).

Levering and Morkowitz (1993) reported that high-trust companies, those in which employees consistently described a great place to work as one where you trust the people with whom you work, significantly outperform industry norms. In their study of organizations that continued to be successful through turbulent times, Collins and Porras (1994) noted trust between members as a significant factor that contributes to long-term

success. Handy (1994) suggested that now more than ever, there is a need for trust between people who work together in an era in which command and control structures can no longer keep up with the need for learning and information. He went on to suggest that controls built from caring relationships are much stronger than those administered from the hierarchical, command, and control structures of the organization. Trust has been shown to be the most significant predictor of an individual's satisfaction with the organization and one's level of participation within it (Boss, 1978; Brunard & Kleiner, 1994; Driscoll, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 1995).

Kouzes and Posner (1995) observed that trust is the basic operating premise that enables group members to consider alternative viewpoints and that maximizes the experience and abilities of the group's members. When people who work together do not trust one another, they ignore and twist facts, ideas, and conclusions while resisting the influence of any group member on their perspective. Joint problem-solving opportunities deteriorate because members withhold important information. Strong team work in the classroom requires high levels of mutual openness, trust, and affirmation for members to influence, and be willingly influenced by, one another (Donaldson, 2001).

The participants in this study addressed the necessity of building trust with their students in order to develop the relationships necessary to work together effectively in the classroom. They identified the inability of many students with severe behavior disorders to build trusting relationships with others as a major factor contributing to their disability. Teaching the student to trust him- or herself is an initial part of the secondary goal of teaching the student to trust others and to function as a contributing member of the class. The participants not only referred to their academic interventions with their students, but

also saw their interventions aimed at developing the student's social, emotional, and behavioral skills as equally important.

The participants also referred to the importance of the classroom teacher's trusting the judgment and input of the educational assistant who has had experience working with the student in order to provide an authentic academic program for the student within the inclusive classroom environment. The participants portrayed their practice as grounded in trusting classroom relationships in which the teacher and assistant share mutual respect and have a mutual influence and impact on each other. They indicated that because of the situated nature of their practice, many events occur throughout the day that require interpretation and need to be negotiated within a respectful spirit of give and take with the teacher. For teachers and educational assistants to negotiate meaning within these situations and create effective solutions for the many challenges they face, their classroom working relationship must be respectful and open enough to provide an element of give and take to be genuine. It is from this genuine feeling that care and concern for one another emerge.

The Need for an Ethic of Caring

Lewin and Regine (2001) found that genuine care enhanced the relationships in companies in which CEOs engendered trust and loyalty in their people, and the people in turn demonstrated their willingness to contribute to the needs of the company. The authors described how "care-full" interactions within an organization create connections between those involved. To be "care-full" is to "care about your work, to care for fellow workers, to care for the organization, to care about the community and the environment" (p. 10). The participants in this study strongly expressed their genuine care through their

concerns for very talented teachers whom they saw as becoming more stressed with additional demands of the learning environment, and who are either choosing to leave the teaching profession or are on sick leave.

In their work with a number of organizations, Lewin and Regine (2001) found that people want to love to go to work, want to love their work, and want to feel a camaraderie and a bond with the people with whom they work; and they want dignity in their work. The authors also found that when people work together, how they interact with each other and the kinds of genuine relationships they form based on authenticity and care make a significant difference. Helgesen (1990), from her interviews with successful business people, found that what most people really want from their work is the feeling that they are part of something important. Senge (1990) affirmed that working together can indeed be a deep source of life meaning and described anything less as just a job. Senge suggested that if work is to be more than just a job, it must have life-enhancing experiences for individuals to be fulfilled amid the challenges. Noddings (1984) described the interdependent nature of work relationships: "How good I can be is partly a function of how you—the other—receive and respond to me" (p. 6). The participants in this study identified this mutual interdependence as the foundation of strong, highly effective classroom teams in their comments referring to their need for teacher understanding and support to do their job effectively and in reiterating that their support can lighten the teachers' load.

Lewin and Regine (2001) explained that caring, connected relationships make stressful situations tolerable when colleagues support one another in difficult circumstances. Providing opportunities for educational assistants to be fully engaged in

their work through the caring, connected relationships in the classroom was identified as a significant need by the participants in this study that, without requiring additional funding, would have the potential to significantly contribute to the educational outcomes for students within inclusive classrooms. The work of building relationships, which Lewin and Regine described as 'acting from a place of care with an intent to connect,' taps into the need that was very clearly articulated by the participants in this study of wanting to be authentically engaged in the process of supporting teachers and students within the classroom.

The Need to Be Connected

Blaire and Caine (1995) asserted that schools need to become more like learning organizations in which opportunities for interaction are created within an environment of dynamic unity through weblike structures that enable staff to feel more supported and integrated, rather than through traditional hierarchical relationships. Helgesen (1995) compared work relationships to a web in architectural terms, in that they build from the center, out, through a continuous process of spinning new "tendrils of connection" (p. 13) while continually strengthening those that already exist. This architectural design, used as a metaphor, recognizes that the periphery and the center are interdependent and that balance and harmony are essential if the periphery is to stay intact; if only the center is strong, the edges will quickly fray. Because tasks at the periphery matter as much as those in the center of the web, those who perform them are equally important. Capra (1975) referred to *universal interwovenness*, emphasizing the interdependence of all things and affirming the value and importance of every part of the greater whole. There is a need for a conceptual shift in our perceptions of classroom staff relationships—from a

hierarchical structure to a weblike design—which provides flexible relationships among team members with an emphasis on the task to be accomplished as opposed to the individual's position. If we begin to perceive classroom environments as filled with interdependent relationships, we can move away from our need to analyze roles in terms of discrete tasks.

Costa and Liebmann (1997) suggested the need to perceive those with whom we work in schools not only as gifted individuals, but also as a part of a greater system in which our connections with one another are as important as our differences. The behaviors and actions of all members of the classroom are interrelated, and what one person does or does not do within the class has the potential to affect all members of the classroom to some extent. Gardiner (1998) emphasized the importance of our interconnectedness through our work environments by stating that wholeness is our natural state; unrelated separateness is an illusion. Spretnak (1991) reinforced the natural occurrence of opportunities to develop our sense of connectedness in the workplace by suggesting, "We do not need to invent a ground of connectedness, but only to realize it" (p. 188).

The participants described their need to feel connected to the teacher and their students through authentic work within the context of the classroom. As well, they want their position to add value to the teaching/learning process and are willing to devote time to endeavors that they feel are worthwhile. Through their descriptions of defining moments in their practice, the participants stated that their contribution to the school is enhanced when they have opportunities to build relationships with staff, students, and the school community. Educational assistants need to be perceived as full participative

members of the school community. By beginning to pay attention to how we treat people and by realizing the potential interactions between staff members to create possibilities for more human connections, those schools who take the relational dimension seriously will have the advantage of attracting and retaining effective assistants who want to make a difference in the lives of the students and staff with whom they work (Lewin & Regine, 2001).

The role of assistants who are supporting students with severe behavior disorders has expanded because of the changes within the context of inclusive classrooms over the past 10 years. To support the role of assistants who are working with students with severe behavior disorders in inclusive classrooms, the perceptions held by others of the role of the educational assistant in these positions need to change.

The Expanded Role of Educational Assistants

Participants' patterns of response in relation to this finding of the study are discussed within the following areas: increased complexity of the context of classrooms, increased complexity of the role of educational assistants, increased tension between job description and role, shared responsibility of meeting students' needs, needed variety of classroom assignments, and required classroom team work.

Increased Complexity of the Context of Classrooms

Throughout the interviews the participants frequently referred to their concern that the role of educational assistants working with students who have behavior disorders has expanded, and, as a result, there is a need for change in the perceptions held by many teachers and administrators of the assistant's role. From the participants' descriptions, it is evident that their practice is situated in the context of the classroom and the school. For

assistants assigned to students with severe behavior disorders in regular classrooms, the nature of their work varies and is dependent on the integration of a number of factors in the classroom; for example, the student's needs, other students, grade level, and so on. The participants described the extent to which these learning environments have changed in Alberta since the provincial policy mandating inclusive education was implemented. Some of the factors that have contributed to this changing educational environment include increased societal demands for accountability and a consumer approach to education; expectations for inclusive education that meet the academic, emotional, social, and physical needs of students with very diverse needs; time and budget restraints—for example, the cost of technology and training needed to stay current and costs associated with maintaining and constructing school facilities; information overload with increased curriculum content and alternate learning options—for example, the instructional shift to a constructivist model, access to information and program delivery alternatives; and the changing roles of students, teachers, educational assistants, and parents.

The increased complexity of the classroom context has added to the complexity of the role of the educational assistant in supporting students with severe behavior disorders in these learning environments. The term *complexity* is used here in reference to the interrelatedness of the factors affecting their practice, not to the concept of being complicated. Educational assistants support both students and teachers, often at multiple levels within a school. This practice frequently requires the teacher and the assistant to interpret the assistant's role within the context of the learning situation. The complexity of the classroom context, combined with the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, makes clarification of the assistant's role by the teacher and/or the

administrator important. The participants felt that the scope of their practice was dependent on the classroom teacher's and school administrator's understanding of their own values, beliefs, and attitudes in relation to the practice of educational assistants. Clarification of the assistant's role in the classroom enables assistants to understand the extent of the responsibilities of their position and helps to identify the resources available to their position. Costa and Garmston (2002) proposed that nearly all relationship difficulties are rooted in conflicting or ambiguous expectations surrounding roles and goals. Unclear expectations lead to misunderstanding, disappointment, decreased trust, burnout, and potential legal liability issues.

Increased Complexity of the Role of Educational Assistants

Peppers and Briskin (2000) proposed that *role* is more than a job description with clear responsibilities. They theorized that role is a blending of the person and the position, so that the strengths of both are brought out in the workplace. These authors also suggested that whenever people work together, they need to learn the roles of their co-workers and that with every role there is a set of expectations about how the role interacts with all the others. The specific responsibilities assigned to the assistant are dependent on the assistant's background experience and training, the needs of the student, the requirements of the teacher, and the resources that are available within the school and the school division (ATA, 2000). Classroom organization is configured differently for different classrooms in order to reflect the strengths and needs of different class groups; the practice of assistants within these classrooms varies depending on the situation.

To enable educational assistants to contribute their full potential to the educational outcomes for students with severe behavior disorders, there must be a fairly

radical shift in the perceptions held by many educators of the role of educational assistants in inclusive classrooms. What began as a clerical, housekeeping position has expanded into a position that requires training and/or experience and that requires assistants to be valued as contributing team members (Bauwens & Mueller, 2000). The participants suggested that a lack of understanding of the complexity of their role by teachers, administrators, and community members, combined with a shortage of qualified individuals, often results in people being hired into the position without the training or experience required to be successful. This hiring practice makes it difficult for both the assistant and the teacher, in that the teacher usually does not have the time or resources to train the person in the position.

When the assistant is not able to meet the needs of the student, the assistant frequently becomes frustrated or feels overwhelmed by the extent of the student's needs and quits, leaving the student without the necessary support. Darling-Hammond and Sykes (1999), when referring to the need for standards for teacher education, emphasized that untrained people do not simply walk into a classroom and automatically become successful. The participants in this study suggested that the same concept applies to educational assistants assigned to support students with severe behavior disorders. The participants strongly endorsed the need for preservice education, inservice training, and mentorship opportunities to prepare assistants and teachers in the areas of collaborating as a team to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, understanding the needs of these students and adapting learning activities and the learning environment to meet these needs, and providing school/division policy information related to their classroom work. The participants referred to the ways that a preservice orientation

session that includes both assistants and teachers could clarify some of the ambiguity associated with their role in relation to the teacher's role.

Increased Tension Between Job Description and Role

The participants' responses reflected that the role of the educational assistant assigned to support students with severe behavior disorders within an inclusive classroom cannot be reduced to a list of descriptors. The nature of the practice of educational assistants is situated, and although there are parts of the assistant's practice that are certain, predictable and regular, there is not a magic list of clearly articulated descriptions of the role of assistants that applies across classrooms. It is a complex web of inseparable relationships connecting the student with whom the assistant works, the teacher, the other students in the class, and members of the school community. Job descriptions generally provide a list of observable tasks and cannot capture all that the assistant does. Distilling and reducing value-creating work into the narrow confines of job descriptions limits what educational assistants can do and detracts from their contribution to the full range of student outcomes that could possibly be attained within the classroom. Job descriptions tend to reinforce rigid mind-sets that limit skills and erect 'turf' boundaries around even trivial tasks. Getting beyond the job description is an important step in transforming mechanistic classroom structures into a living system that enables staff to fully engage in their practice within the limits defined by the teacher's responsibility, the student's program needs, and the available resources (Shenkman, 1996).

As the identified needs of students in classrooms continue to grow, classroom staff are faced with a widening range of more diverse, more sophisticated, evolving demands. To meet these demands, classroom staff are required to expand their

contributions in two directions. First, they must take on more responsibilities to meet the increasing student/parent demands; second, in order to do this, they must stretch inward to broaden and deepen their own skills and knowledge. Classroom staff are being required to add more capacity: to deal with a more diverse range of student needs, add more capability, do things differently (Shenkman, 1996). Educational assistants cannot add to their capabilities by working within the narrow confines of specific job descriptions. They frequently find themselves in a position of having to ask permission to do their 'real job,' and teachers are expected to oversee how effectively the assistant performs a set of narrowly defined tasks. An educational assistant cannot act decisively and creatively when most actions must be cleared by the teacher. Klatt, Murphy, and Irvine (1998) confirmed the need in our present knowledge-based society for workers to demonstrate creativity, commitment to results, judgment, and discretion in order to be successful. These authors emphasized that judgment and innovation, like creativity and decision making, can never be fully described in a job description; however, these behaviors and attitudes are the hallmarks of knowledge-based work. Clustering classroom tasks into a range of decision-making actions enables educational assistants to engage with students and teachers within meaningful classroom learning experiences. Assigning educational assistants areas of responsibility can transform their good intentions into commitment to their position. Committed workers tend to view their position in terms of who benefits from their contribution rather than in terms of a minutiae of tasks associated with their job descriptions (Shenkman, 1996).

Teachers and assistants working together to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders encounter many incidents throughout the day that require

interpretation or negotiation. When assistants work within an area of responsibility, their work requires their judgment and initiative in responding and making needed adjustments so that the right things happen within the students' programs. Classroom activities are complex, and to prepare, implement, and coordinate this volume of educational activity requires that the teacher and the educational assistant work together as a collaborative classroom team, not as two individuals with each doing his/her own thing in the classroom.

Actualizing the assistants' potential for contribution to the classroom will require a move beyond the listing of tasks within job descriptions to assigning assistants responsibility associated with their work within the classroom. This approach requires a shift in perception; the tasks that educational assistants perform are just the tools used to achieve what really matters, which is contributing to the educational outcomes for the students to whom they are assigned and supporting the teachers with whom they work.

The root of the word *employment* is the Latin word *implicare,* which means 'to be involved' (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 1998). The participants in this study consistently referred to their need to be authentically involved in the planning and implementation of their students' programs. Villa and Thousand (2000) found it disturbing that some classroom teams do not include educational assistants within the IPP planning process, even though it is the educational assistant who provides direct support to the challenged student and many of the team's decisions determine the daily activities and responsibilities of the educational assistant.

The participants voiced their concern about the added stress on teachers when the teacher is unsure as to how to work effectively with the assistant to enable the assistant to

help the teacher meet the student's needs. The participants encouraged teachers to see the value of the contribution of highly skilled, experienced assistants who are effective in their work with their students. They affirmed that assistants want to support student learning in the context of the classroom, not to take over from the teacher. They discussed the need for teachers to understand how the assistant can contribute to the learning process and how to delegate tasks and responsibilities to the assistant.

Shared Responsibility of Meeting Students' Needs

Throughout the research the participants emphasized the need for administrators and teachers to realize that meeting the needs of students with severe behavior disorders is a shared responsibility, not the sole responsibility of the assistant assigned to the student. Some aspects of sharing the responsibility suggested by the participants include:

- the administrator supporting the student's behavior plan;
- the other staff members' taking responsibility to enforce consequences for the student's inappropriate behavior when the assistant is not present;
- the teacher understanding the student's emotional, social, physical and academic needs;
- the teacher planning with the assistant on how best to meet the student's needs through an authentic academic program;
- the teacher and the administrator scheduling alternate times throughout the day for the assistant to work with other students or to take needed breaks with other staff in the school;
- the teacher and the administrator including the assistant in meetings related to the student's program; and

- the teacher and the administrator providing the assistant with the information that he or she needs in order to work with the student and do his or her job in the classroom.

Needed Variety of Classroom Assignments

As a state co-ordinator of paraeducator training, Patricia Mueller (1997) found that educational assistants assigned to support students within inclusive classrooms were typically assigned to work with the student with severe behavior disorders for the entire school day. Gartner and Lipsky (2000) mapped the evolution of the role of educational assistants within inclusive classrooms as moving from the initial stage in which individual assistants were assigned to students with special needs who were included in regular classrooms, to the point where assistants are assigned to support all students in the inclusive classroom. Garnett (1996) strongly suggested that students need to view all adults in the classroom as being responsible for the learning of all students in the class, not just of a selected few. Including educational assistants in the responsibility for meeting the learning needs for all students in the class creates the possibility of unleashing the capacity of classroom teams which, in turn, enhances performance and productivity. Bauwens and Mueller (2000) identified the need for educational assistants to have time during the day to work with normally developing students in order to understand the skills and competencies being developed by their same-age peers. This practice can reduce burnout for educational assistants, expand the range of potential contribution by the assistant to the classroom, and provide a framework for the assistant to use when adapting learning activities. As well, this practice reduces the potential for the student to develop dependency on one staff member.

Donaldson (2001) maintained that in a school every adult is both "shaper and shaped and each person owns a share of influence and responsibility, not just over his or her individual job, but over school-wide concerns" (p. 41). Costa and Liebmann (1997) advised that because of the amount of clear thinking required to meet the competing demands for speed, flexibility, quality, service, and innovation in education these days, everyone in the organization must be involved. Garnett (1996) suggested that teachers in inclusive classrooms can better meet the needs of all students by collaborating with the educational assistant in sharing responsibilities and resources, which is distinctly different from classrooms in which teachers work alone. *Webster's* (1987) defined *collaborate* as a combination of two Latin terms, *com* and *laborare,* meaning 'to labor together' or 'to work jointly with others.' Idol, Nevin, and Paolucci-Whitcomb (1993) furthered this definition by referring to collaboration as an interactive process enabling people with diverse backgrounds and expertise to generate creative solutions to mutually identified problems, presuming that the desired outcome is enhanced student learning in the most appropriate integrated context.

Required Classroom Team Work

Collaborative team practices bring people of diverse backgrounds and interests together to share their knowledge and skills to generate new and novel ideas for meeting the needs of learners (Nevin, et al., 1990; Skrtic, 1987). Larson and LaFasto (1989) confirmed that these potential outcomes for team work were supported in their three-year study of work teams in which they found it difficult to identify any goal that the collective "we" would be incapable of achieving (p. 13). Garner (1995) suggested that when individuals work in teams, they are more likely to assume responsibility for their

decisions and actions and to be committed to working together to improve work situations in meaningful ways.

Larson and LaFasto (1989) defined a *team* as "two or more people who have a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained and coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for the attainment of the goal or objective" (p. 19). The need for collaborative teams in schools has accelerated because of the increasingly complex and broadening identification of students with exceptionalities. Garner (1995) affirmed that the curriculum needs of students who are on individual education programs and whose academic program must be integrated into the regular grade-level curriculum and classroom activities are complex.

In 1951 Whitehouse proposed the concept of educators collaborating in the classroom to improve the educational outcomes for all children in the class. Since then numerous special interest education groups have called for collaborative teaming in schools (National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion, 1994, 1995). A database of findings from both research and practice documents the effectiveness of collaborative teams from preschool to adult education levels (Idol et al., 1993; Idol, Nevin, & Paolucci-Whitcomb, 1999; Villa, Thousand, Nevin, & Malgeri, 1996). The education literature confirmed that within schools that have successfully restructured themselves to better meet the needs of all students, personnel consistently attributed their success to collaborative teaming and group decision-making processes (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Thousand, 1990; Thousand et al., 1986).

Classroom staff who work collaboratively within inclusive classrooms are having to address a student population with increasingly diverse learning needs that include the

combined effects of poverty, child abuse, and neglect; increased family stress, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse; dysfunctional families; distorted societal values; increased curriculum content; factors associated with technology; demands for accountability from parents; an underfunded, overburdened social services system; and a diverse range of students with disabilities (Patterson, Purkey, & Parker, 1986). These complex challenges faced by classroom staff cannot be understood by breaking them into isolated components. Kline and Saunders (1998) stressed that effective work is based on the ability to connect with others in order to get something done. As Senge (2000) pointed out, in education we have traditionally reduced and fragmented complex phenomena into components, then built up specialized knowledge of the parts. Lovejoy's (1994; as cited in Goerner, 1994) comment made more than 10 years ago that "there are no separate problems anymore" with singular causes resonates with classroom staff today. Practicing educators live the daily reality of ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity in their classrooms and schools (Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997). Increasing diversity in classrooms, with the growing need for more in-depth learning in order to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders, necessitates greater interdependence and more intricate communication (Merry, 1995). However, LaFasto and Larson (2001) suggested that working together involves an intricate network of relationships that requires individuals to be more than a collection of knowledgeable, competent, well-intentioned people.

The documented benefits of collaborative team work in the educational literature are relatively scarce compared to the those in the business literature, which has volumes published on this subject. This may be related to the fact that the values of effective team

work are so closely connected to educational values that perhaps there is an underlying assumption that educators are naturally experiencing this phenomenon and that there is little need to consciously think and write about it. Some of the identified benefits of collaborative classroom work by teachers and assistants include the following:

- becoming authentically involved through the assignment of significant work to assistants to acknowledge their initiative can enhance their commitment to their position;
- practicing collaborative team work enables classroom staff to model the type of work structure that students will encounter as citizens of a highly complex and interdependent 21st-century global community;
- considering diverse perspectives of others helps team member to critically examine their own assumptions which can lead to enhanced education programs for students;
- gaining a better understanding of why certain behaviors are being exhibited by students through staff members sharing their diverse perspectives;
- hearing another's perspective can affirm one's ideas or can provide a compelling alternative view to inspire change, an action that creates a tremendous resource for problem solving and collegial support;
- sharing expectations and planning to provide a more consistent approach for student interventions and curricula programming;
- providing higher quality education programs through integrating different perspectives for improved decision making in order to create stronger linkages between planning and implementation stages of the student's IPP;

- achieving greater job satisfaction in both the teacher and the assistant by developing a sense of belonging and mutual support in coping with classroom stress while enhancing professional knowledge and skill; and
- making better use of instructional time by teachers' completing those tasks that require their expertise and skills (Colenso, 2000; Garner, 1995; Huber, 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 1989; Rainforth & York-Barr, 1997; Smyth, 1989).

The participants described the advantages of working together as a team with classroom teachers and sharing their knowledge, experience, and skills as allowing them to better meet the needs of their students with severe behavior disorders. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) found that collaborative cultures constantly convert tacit knowledge, which is rooted in our experience, values, beliefs an emotions often at an unconscious level, into shared, explicit knowledge which can be communicated through interaction. Collaborative team work involving the teacher and the educational assistant within inclusive classrooms is critical because one person cannot have all the information, skills, or knowledge necessary to meet the needs of the students. The participants described the challenges of hierarchical classroom relationships in which all classroom decisions are vetted through one person. In those situations in which all classroom decision making is the responsibility of the teacher, there are some important issues that are not addressed because of the inability of the teacher, as one individual, to deal with every situation. When teachers value the contribution of educational assistants and collaborate with assistants to mutually achieve agreed-upon goals for the student with severe behavior, a sense of reciprocity develops in which both staff members feel respected, appreciated, and supported (Marcic, 1997). However, administrators must realize that the

collaborative team work that mobilizes teachers and assistants to share their actions, beliefs, and values cannot develop without joint planning time (Donaldson, 2001).

To move forward in education, we must begin to think in new ways about the meaning and responsibility of shared roles of staff in the classroom. There is a need to develop a new level of consciousness in education in which we question our assumptions in order to develop stronger interconnectedness. Garmston and Wellman (1997) suggest the need for schools to be places in which the staff care about one another "share common goals and values, have skills and knowledge to plan together, problem solve together" and share their ideas to improve instruction (p. 117). Many classroom teams are currently functioning at a level of survival. Rather than assisting teams to function at survival levels, we need to understand the capacities of educational assistants to function in fundamentally new ways within these classroom teams and to think in terms of what is possible (Caine & Caine, 1997a).

The Need for Educational Assistants to Access Essential Information

My interpretation of the data connected to this finding will be discussed under the following four areas: sharing information, allowing information to flow, needing ongoing professional development, and needing constructive feedback.

Sharing Information

The comments of the participants during the interviews reflected the need for assistants working with students with behavior disorders to have access to shared information related to their work. The need is especially pronounced in such areas as: the teacher's expectations and interpretations of his or her work in the classroom; schoolwide information shared at staff meetings and professional development sessions; student-

teacher-parent information meetings and case conferences; and specific information related to the student- that is, medical information, student cumulative file information, and personal information.

The word *share* has two meanings: It means 'to give away a part,' which is an act of generosity, and 'to hold in common,' as in a shared belief system (*Webster's*, 1996). It is critical for teachers to share their expectations related to both the teacher's and the assistant's practice to shift this often unconscious, tacit knowledge to explicit information that the assistant can use to support the teacher's practice. Educational assistants supporting students with severe behavior disorders within inclusive classrooms require the teacher to relay to the assistant what the teacher has planned for the student and the reasons for this plan. This practice enables the assistant to align his or her values, beliefs, and actions with that of the teacher in order to provide more integrated support. When this information is not shared and the assistant is required to interpret what the teacher is thinking, doing, or wanting for the student's program within the context of the classroom, this action results in misunderstanding and confusion. The teacher's sharing of information related to the assistant's practice leads to *shared* understanding and a sense of *shared* purpose.

The traditional hierarchical structure of most organizations, including schools, has in the past limited the sharing of information. In order to meet the demands of the highly competitive marketplace, businesses have evolved toward flatter organizational structures that require communication and team work across organizational boundaries and empowered people at all levels of the organization to be involved in decisions (Bennis, 1997; Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Somerville, 1999; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Senge,

1990). Wheatley (1992) suggested that most organizations are suffering from a fundamental misperception of how information can be managed, controlled, and made stable and useful for organizational purposes. In attempting to understand what it is, how it works, and what might be expected from it, leaders of organizations have tried to contain information by treating it as 'bits' to be transmitted and received through limited channels. Information is not a limited, quantifiable thing, but rather a dynamic element. Wheatley and Kellnor-Rogers (1996) described information as a resource capable of generating itself as long as there are senders and receivers linked together. They suggested that, rather than trying to manage and protect information, organizations need to be developing new ways of generating and circulating more information. Brown and Eisenhardt (1998) emphasized that for organizations to benefit from shared problem solving among individuals, channels for real-time, fact-based communication within and across groups need to be developed. This illustrates the need for educational assistants to take breaks at the same time as other staff members do within the school whenever possible in order to share information and network with colleagues.

Shenkman (1996) maintained that more people are being asked to perform at a higher level of intellect and judgment within the scope of their work. He suggested that, moment by moment, individuals must decide what are the most valuable things they should be doing to succeed at accomplishing the mission. Assistants need to have access to information related to their work to be able to priorize tasks effectively, make decisions within their daily schedule, and interpret the meaning of events and actions within the context of the classroom and the school. Access to information is particularly important for those assistants who are supporting more than one teacher.

Resnick (1991) asserted that making sense of one's practice occurs both within and between individuals. When teachers and assistants authentically share within the context of the classroom, solutions to the challenges they face on a regular basis will emerge from their interactions.

Allowing Information to Flow

Pfeffer (1998) emphasized two important reasons for sharing information within a healthy organization. First, the sharing of inside information conveys to workers that they are trusted which in turn, enhances employee commitment. Second, for people to contribute to enhancing organizational performance and supporting organizational goals, they need to have access to background information and to interpretations of the most recent information. Sharing information diffuses power and enables more people to be accountable for organizational outcomes. Wheatley and Kellnor-Rogers (1996) explained that sharing information helps individuals within an organization to understand its purpose, structure, and history. Classroom staff need a broad distribution of information, points of view, and interpretations in order to make sense of the context of the classroom. As information moves through a porous school network, staff can learn and change, and this new understanding can be integrated into the context of the classroom. But if information is restricted, held tightly in certain areas, the learning and responses of assistants become restricted. Limiting the assistants' access to information also limits their capacity to contribute to the school's goals and purposes.

School administrators and teachers must be willing to share information with all staff and do so without regard to the hierarchical level of the position. When information within a school is limited or restricted to people at specific levels, it spurs cynicism

among staff. Helgesen (1995) advised keeping everyone informed to diffuse speculation and gossip. When we restrict access to information by excluding educational assistants from staff meetings or case conferences involving the students with whom they work, we imply that the assistant has no right to the information by virtue of rank. If educational assistants have restricted access to information, are not involved in decision making in relation to their position, and must rely on the teacher to direct their activities all day long, their capacity for contribution is significantly diminished, along with their intrinsic motivation for their work. This practice narrows the information available to assistants to just enough to perform their job. The message that is implied from this practice is that assistants are relatively unimportant to the overall functioning of the school, which often results in making assistants feel less personally autonomous and less valued.

Kouzes and Posner (1995) maintained that the most insidious aspect of the tight control of information within an organization is that it erodes any intrinsic motivation that a person may have for accomplishing a task. When assistants are not able to do things until they are told because they do not have the necessary information, over time their capacity as an assistant is diminished. Klein and Izzo (1998) further suggested that intrinsic motivation is augmented when our work is directed toward contributing to something larger than our immediate personal needs. Seeing a definable difference in our work taps into a sense of personal contribution and creates a sustainable commitment to the organization. By providing assistants with the information they require to do their work effectively, schools can create an environment that provides opportunities for assistants to contribute to the learning outcomes for students. Offering assistants the chance to learn, grow, and contribute to the school community is an authentic, viable, and

mutually rewarding link that principals have to offer staff in these positions. As Fullan (1999) indicated, people need one another to solve problems, and the motivation to share along with the opportunity to access information requires ongoing interaction.

Wilkinson (1996) emphasized that being socially excluded in one's work and feeling devalued leads to chronic stress, which could be contributing to the high turnover of staff in these positions. However, when classroom staff work together and the teacher shares his or her expertise and information related to the student's program and expectations for the student's behavior and contributions to the class, the assistant can use this information to provide more effective support for the student. The outcomes of these actions spiral back to supporting the teacher.

Needing Ongoing Professional Development

The participants' descriptions of the nature of their work clearly indicated that assistants who are working with students with severe behavior disorders need access to ongoing professional development. Some of their reasons include:

- Educational assistants work with students across a broad spectrum of disabilities, and they need to stay current with recent research in the areas of student learning and behavior. They also need to have access to the most recent information related to new diagnosis of student disabilities.
- Students with severe behavior disorders frequently have a dual diagnosis or multiple disabilities, which requires a complex intervention plan.
- Educational assistants need to access the professional support associated with professional development, which includes access to a variety of sources of

information, networking with knowledgeable colleagues, and opportunities to share common challenges and concerns.

- The severity of the student's disability may be such that teachers are often at a loss as to how to work effectively with the student, and the educational assistant needs access to additional sources of information in order to meet the student's academic, social, emotional, and physical needs.
- Educational assistants are required to support students with special needs and their teachers at multiple levels, which requires both specific and general information provided by professional development opportunities.

For the purposes of this study, research in the area of the need for staff members to access ongoing professional development information is based on teacher research because there is a lack of published material in this area related to educational assistants.

Rosenholtz (1989) found that schools noted for their support of teacher learning develop a collaborative culture in which goals are openly shared and teachers demonstrate their personal commitment and experience a sense of self-efficacy. Rosenholtz also noted that schools that strove for continuous improvement had teachers who viewed teaching as difficult and accepted that they needed to be continually learning and using outside resources to effectively do their jobs. Seeking assistance and support was seen as a strength and a recognition of the need for ongoing learning rather than as a sign of weakness. Joyce and Showers (1995) confirmed that teacher efficacy is enhanced when teachers have opportunities to see new strategies modeled, practice them, and engage in peer dialogue. Guskey (1995) found when teachers were successful with new practices, their confidence and commitment to their position increased.

The need and value of ongoing professional development for teachers is well documented in the literature (Brandt, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Glickman, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman & Miller, 1999; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Stoll & Fink, 1996). The challenge for school boards is how best to meet this need. Increasingly, stand-alone sessions designed to impart the 'right way' of doing something are being replaced by more sustained, coherent, inquiry-based, staff development programs designed to include all school staff.

Lieberman and Miller (1999) discussed the value to professional development for teachers when they can relate to one another, trust one another, and support one another in their attempts to meet the needs of students through their personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement. As staff who work together develop a professional community among themselves, they "discover many new ways to work with students and, in concert with one another, feel enabled to try things, talk about them, shape them, and gain confidence" in their work with students (p. 62). The responses of the participants in this study indicate that the same could be true for teachers and educational assistants who work with the same students.

Needing Constructive Feedback

The participants in this study strongly endorsed the idea that to be effective in their work they need to access both formal and informal feedback on their work performance from teachers and administrators. They addressed three primary reasons for needing this information: to improve their performance by changing some aspect of what they were doing; to confirm their performance, which can be intrinsically motivating and move the individual to perform enhanced work; and to make the individual aware of his

or her blind spots, which are those things that others can see in our work that we cannot see ourselves. Bruner (1966) proposed that learning depends on knowledge of results at a time and at a place where the information can be used for improvement. Effective feedback is provided when a teacher recognizes what the assistant is experiencing and provides detailed information about that experience. This suggests that, for best results, feedback should be ongoing. Csikszentmihalyi (1993) felt that too often it takes a long time for people to find out how well they are doing.

The word *scotoma* originates from the Greek word *scoto*, meaning darkness; a partial loss of vision or blind spot in an otherwise normal visual field (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 1998). Psychologists use the term *scotoma* to refer to our blind spots, those times when we fail to see alternatives due to our preconceived ideas about reality. There are times when we require feedback from someone familiar with our work for us to acknowledge the needed changes that we can make in our work (Bandura, 1997). LaFasto and Larson (2001), studying more than 600 teams, found that an underlying problem in work relationships seems to be the individual's lack of awareness or *scotoma* related to the extent of one's role in the relationship. Individuals tend to believe that they are more constructive in their approach to relationships and that their interpersonal skills are stronger than they really are. Individuals tend to credit themselves with more ability to build relationships than one's co-workers acknowledge. LaFasto and Larson's research reveals that when people are willing to recognize their interpersonal deficits, they tend to feel that these deficits are not as significant as others identify them to be, and they believe their contribution to the relationship is far greater than anything they do that may detract from it. Generally, people try to do the right thing in the right way, and it is difficult for

most people to think that they contribute to problems in work relationships. In fact, individuals consistently minimize how much their contribution detracts from the development of a relationship's full potential. Information outlining an individual's shortcomings related to work performance usually requires a formal evaluation.

In their 20-year study, LaFasto and Larson (2001) found that working well together does not come easily to most people. If classroom staff are to work together effectively, they have to deal with contention. With little or no training, classroom staff are often directed to work together and are expected to deal with tough educational issues and intense interpersonal challenges as they arise. Because tough issues in relationships require additional time and emotional energy, they are frequently ignored. The individuals involved in these situations usually hope that the issue will be resolved on their own or through the intervention of others.

The teachers' inability to provide constructive feedback in a respectful way was identified as a common problem by the participants in this study. LaFasto and Larson (2001) maintained that many people are hesitant to give feedback until an issue has reached a point at which one is willing to risk the entire relationship in order to try to ameliorate the situation. In these situations, both parties usually anticipate resistance and want to get the experience over with as quickly as possible without any negative repercussions. As well, LaFasto and Larson pointed out that one's natural instinct is to be self-protective and that our basic defensive nature wants us "to remain safe, to feel confident and to be in control" (p. 44), which is counter to the openness required if there is to be acceptance and provision of constructive feedback . The authors also asserted that we tend to become defensive about issues that are important to us, especially when the

outcome is different from that which we think it should be or our values are compromised. If classroom staff are to work together effectively, they must overcome the innate tendency to fight or flee these challenging situations. The energy within these situations is transformed from generating creative ideas to addressing the issue being discussed, to defending one's position. Under these circumstances creative ideas cannot emerge and important issues are not resolved.

In their study, LaFasto and Larson (2001) questioned what behaviors were most important in a team relationship. Two factors were consistently identified across groups: (a) openness, meaning a willingness to deal with issues objectively, and (b) supportiveness, meaning treating others respectfully to bring out their best abilities. When identifying behaviors that interfere with the success of a team, again lack of openness and supportiveness were most often cited. The participants in this study stressed the need for the teacher to be open and willing to identify issues that needed to be dealt with in a constructive and timely manner.

Lepsinger and Lucia (1997) discussed research from the early 1950s on employee motivation that revealed that both productivity and job satisfaction increased when people received information regularly on how close they were to performance targets and what specifically they were doing that kept them on or off track. What was also recognized was that if the process was not handled effectively, these discussions had a negative effect on employee motivation. The authors concluded from their research that feedback is an important element of a person's professional and personal development. The participants in this study emphasized their need to receive informal, ongoing,

constructive information related to their classroom performance from the teacher as well as yearly formal performance evaluations from their administration.

At some point, all classroom staff can benefit from constructive feedback to help them realign with program direction or expectations. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) proposed that what makes feedback valuable is the explicit information it contains: that the individual has succeeded in achieving his/her goal which "creates order in consciousness and strengthens the structure of the self" (p. 57). Kepner-Tregoe (1995), a North American training and development company, found that 96% of the workers they studied agreed with the statement, "I get a lot of satisfaction out of knowing I've done a good job" (p. 5). However, as LaFasto and Larson (2001) pointed out, feedback is difficult to give well, and it is hard to receive objectively. It takes courage for a team member to raise an issue in a respectful manner, and it takes maturity for a team member to change a personal point of view on an important issue when presented with more compelling information. In Gardner's (1990) terms, effective working relationships require a willingness to "shape" and to "be shaped" that forms around mutual openness. Members of classroom teams are more willing to be influenced by one another if they genuinely feel that they can trust the other person. Trust in one another leads to openness and to affirmation of one another's personal talents to develop resources that can contribute to the fulfillment of team needs (Barth, 1990; Helgesen, 1995; Noddings, 1984).

LaFasto and Larson (2001) suggested that feedback is the essence of growth within working relationships: "Good feedback is associated with heightened sense of personal accountability, a wide range of worker satisfaction factors, and enhanced

performance, especially in groups whose goals demand extensive interpersonal relationships" as do classroom staff (p. 46). Morrison (2002) maintains that feedback must occur between individuals within an interacting system.

The participants in this study strongly endorsed their need for feedback in order to change a practice that is not working in the classroom. They also discussed their need to meet with the teacher to enable the teacher to share his or her understandings of the purpose and direction of the student's program as well as to have access to information related to their work.

Chapter Summary

My interpretation of the findings of this study is connected to the participants' common responses in relation to four major findings of this study. The first finding, *the teacher's and administrator's understanding of the work of educational assistants*, linked the participants' responses to the importance of teachers and administrators understanding the complex nature of the practice of educational assistants and demonstrating that they value the assistant's position within the classroom and the school. The interpretation also addresses a number of recommendations made by participants as to what teachers and administrators could do to support the practice of the educational assistant. The second finding, *the educational assistant's relationships with staff and students*, connected participants' responses to the paradigm of classroom working relationships as webs of interrelated, mutually dependent connections rather than as the currently held view in many classrooms of the traditional hierarchical associations based on authority. The third finding, *the expanded role of educational assistants*, addressed how the diversity of students' needs have changed the context of regular

classrooms. This change has required a shift from a limited view of the role of educational assistants as solely "teachers' helpers" to an expanded view of their role as legitimate members of classroom teams who provide support to both teachers and students. The fourth finding, *the educational assistant's access to essential information*, addressed the reasons that educational assistants need to be included in the sharing of information to support them doing their job effectively. Participants also provided suggestions for some of the natural ways that this could be done in schools.

My interpretation of the participants' responses in this study clearly reflects that the practice of the educational assistant is dependent on the practice of the teacher. The assistant's practice is tightly interwoven with and difficult to disentangle from the practice of the teacher to the extent that the scope of the assistant's practice depends on and is limited by the teacher's understanding and support of the educational assistant's role in the classroom. The participants' responses also indicate that the assistant's position is dynamic rather than static and can be integrated into several levels throughout the school. The nature of the educational assistant's position changes, depending on the context of the situation.

The dependence of the educational assistant's position on the practice of the classroom teacher and the situated nature of the educational assistant's role within the context of the learning environment will be discussed in the following chapter.

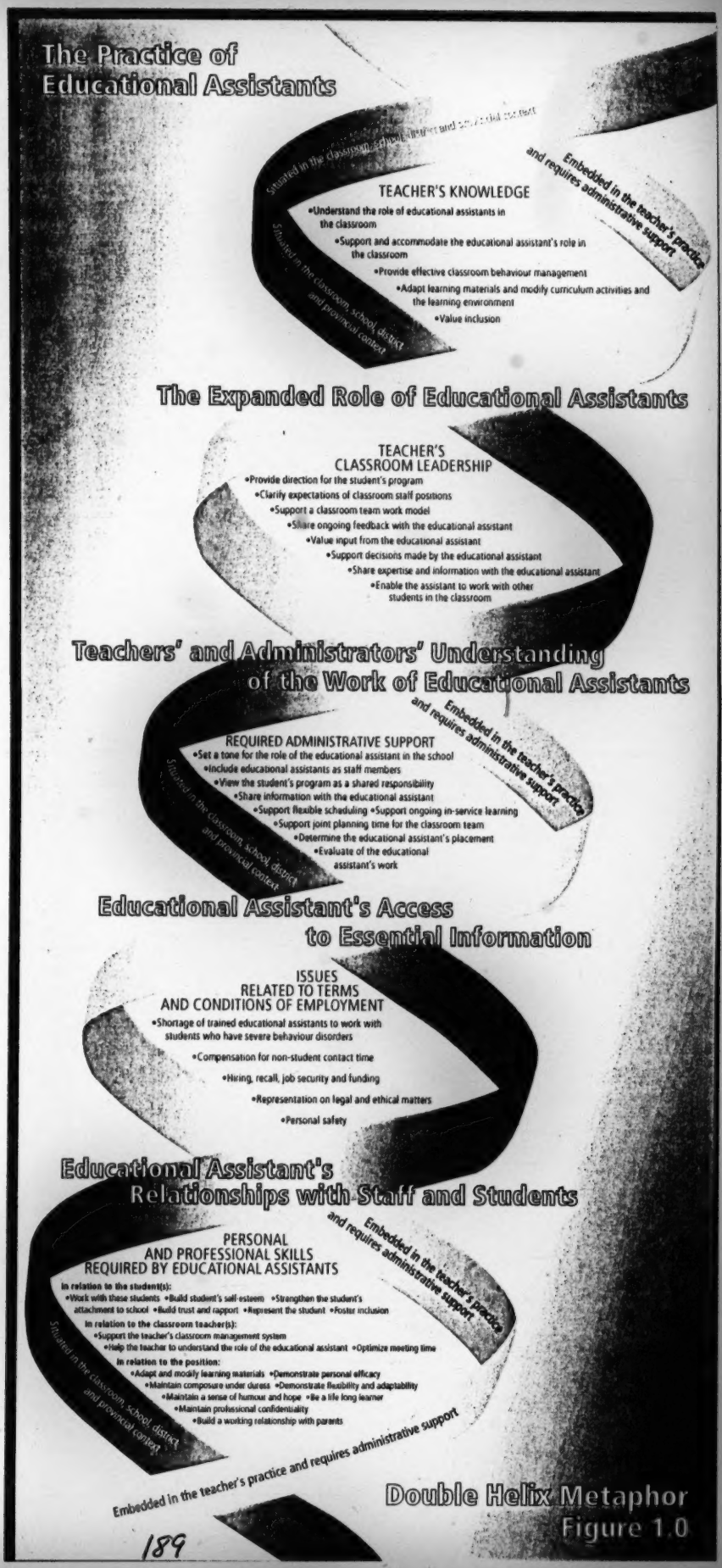
CHAPTER SIX

ELABORATION OF THE FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Two distinct "cluster themes" formed from the patterns of "related characteristics" within the five themes and four findings that emerged from this study. These cluster themes are significant to understanding the ways in which educational assistants perceive their practice (Boyatzis, 1998). The two cluster themes are (a) *The educational assistant's practice is embedded in the practice of the classroom teacher and requires the support of the school administrator, and* (b) *the practice of the educational assistant is situated in and unfolds within the context of the classroom, the school, and the school division*. Throughout the interpretation process, the interrelatedness of these two cluster themes began to take shape, and it became evident that both need to be understood within the same framework.

Double Helix Metaphor

Both cluster themes are linked to a dense network of relationships within each of the categories associated with the themes and findings of this study. A model of the double helix is used to illustrate the extent of the interconnectedness of these relationships (see Figure 1). The double helix, most commonly known as the DNA infrastructure, is composed of two complementary strands winding in parallel, each carrying different genetic information and connecting periodically at bridging points. Each separate strand of the double helix contains a unique sequence of amino acids that determine the composition of the whole. The strands are linked together at critical points by bridges of hydrogen bonds. The two complementary strands create an integrated


The Practice of Educational Assistants
Situated in the classroom, school, district and provincial context
Embedded in the teacher's practice and requires administrative support
TEACHER'S KNOWLEDGE
•Understand the role of educational assistants in the classroom
•Support and accommodate the educational assistant's role in the classroom
•Provide effective classroom behaviour management
•Adapt learning materials and modify curriculum activities and the learning environment
•Value inclusion
Situated in the classroom, school, district and provincial context
The Expanded Role of Educational Assistants
TEACHER'S CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP
•Provide direction for the student's program
•Clarify expectations of classroom staff positions
•Support a classroom team work model
•Share ongoing feedback with the educational assistant
•Value input from the educational assistant
•Support decisions made by the educational assistant
•Share expertise and information with the educational assistant
•Enable the assistant to work with other students in the classroom
Teachers' and Administrators' Understanding of the Work of Educational Assistants
Embedded in the teacher's practice and requires administrative support
REQUIRED ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT
•Set a tone for the role of the educational assistant in the school
•Include educational assistants as staff members
•View the student's program as a shared responsibility
•Share information with the educational assistant
•Support flexible scheduling •Support ongoing in-service learning
•Support joint planning time for the classroom team
•Determine the educational assistant's placement
•Evaluate of the educational assistant's work
Situated in the classroom, school, district and provincial context
Educational Assistant's Access to Essential Information
ISSUES RELATED TO TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT
•Shortage of trained educational assistants to work with students who have severe behaviour disorders
•Compensation for non-student contact time
•Hiring, recall, job security and funding
•Representation on legal and ethical matters
•Personal safety
Educational Assistant's Relationships with Staff and Students
Embedded in the teacher's practice and requires administrative support
PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS REQUIRED BY EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANTS
In relation to the student(s):
•Work with these students •Build student's self-esteem •Strengthen the student's attachment to school •Build trust and rapport •Represent the student •Foster inclusion
In relation to the classroom teacher(s):
•Support the teacher's classroom management system
•Help the teacher to understand the role of the educational assistant •Optimize meeting time
In relation to the position:
•Adapt and modify learning materials •Demonstrate personal efficacy
•Maintain composure under duress •Demonstrate flexibility and adaptability
•Maintain a sense of humour and hope •Be a life long learner
•Maintain professional confidentiality
•Build a working relationship with parents
Situated in the classroom, school, district and provincial context
Embedded in the teacher's practice and requires administrative support

Double Helix Metaphor
Figure 1.0

whole that is different and more meaningful than either of the strands functioning alone (Regan, 1995; Regan & Brooks, 1995). See Figure 1.

Each cluster theme is formed by the data in this study and is represented by one of the strands of the double helix. Their entwined formation represents the interrelatedness of the five themes and four findings, which combine to form each cluster theme. Although each cluster theme is composed of different sets of interrelated categories representing the nature of the practice of the educational assistants, depending on the context and the individuals involved, the themes and findings are found within both clusters. The linkage of the two cluster themes at common points creates a more meaningful interpretation of the data than would be the case if the cluster themes were treated as separate entities.

An Ecological Perspective of the Practice of Educational Assistants

To view the position of educational assistants who are working in inclusive classrooms with students with severe behavior disorders from an ecological perspective acknowledges the importance of the relationships of the educational assistant and the teacher with the required support of the administrator within the context of the learning environment. This ecological view focuses on both the individual and the environment (Higashi & Burns, 1991; Keiny, 2002; Kellor & Golley, 2000; Pence, 1988; Pickett, Kolasa, & Jones, 1994). What follows is a description of the ecological perspective of the practice of educational assistants and a comparison of Bronfenbrenner's model of human development in relation to the assistant's practice within the context of the classroom, school, and school division.

In 1866 Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist, coined the term *ecology* by combining two Greek words, *oikos*, meaning dwelling place, and *logos*, meaning ultimate truth, principle, or law. Kellor and Golley (2000) proposed that "ecology endeavors to discover pattern and process in natural networks" (p. 17) and "is mainly concerned with organisms; groups of organisms; interactions between organisms and between their environments; and complexes made up of the physical, chemical, and biological components called ecosystems" (p. 10). Lincoln, Boxshall and Clark (1998) define ecosystem as "a community of organisms and their physical environment interacting as an ecological unit" (p. 95). An ecosystem has at least two parts: organisms and an environment. An ecological perspective refers to the study of organisms in relation to their environment and takes into account differences among individuals in relation to the context (Keller & Golley, 2000).

Goerner (1994) suggested that ecology portrays "a web of cause and effect that has coherence, hidden order, inseparability, and subtle connectivity" (p. 54). Capra (1996) defined the characteristics of ecosystems as integrated wholes whose properties cannot be reduced to those of isolated parts. The essential properties of each of the parts develop from the "organizing relations" of the parts and are properties of the whole, which none of the parts have without the ordered relationships that are characteristic to the system. In fact, quantum physics has proven that there are no parts at all; what we refer to as a part is "merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships" (p. 37). The properties of the parts are not intrinsic properties and can be understood only "within the context of the larger whole" (p. 37). Capra confirmed that the properties of the system are destroyed when a system is reduced to isolated elements and suggested that when we

shift our thinking from parts to the whole, we begin thinking in terms of relationships rather than objects.

The practice of educational assistants cannot simply be reduced to a list of descriptors, but must be understood within the context which refers to the surrounding conditions or circumstances within the classroom, the school, and the school district. When the educational assistant's role is defined as a list of tasks, we lose sight of the potential contribution that the assistant is capable of making to the students' programs, to the teacher's practice, and to the school. The educational assistant's role in supporting a student with severe behavior disorders in an inclusive classroom is dependent on the assistant's training and experience, the needs of the student, the needs of other students in the class, the practice of the teacher, the support of the administrator, and the resources available within the school and the school district. The participants' descriptions confirm that these elements, which are specific to the context of each assistant's practice, cannot be separated from one another. Each of these elements, directly or indirectly, affects the nature of the practice of educational assistants through multiple systems of influence.

Goerner (1994) contended that to shift from a mechanistic Newtonian world view to an ecological perspective requires a realization that we cannot always break things down into isolated parts within simple, independent, causal systems. We have to develop the awareness of a web of mutual causation rather than a linear sequence of noninteracting causes by acknowledging the limitations of science to know, control, predict, and reduce the world into existing smallest units. An ecological perspective is not in opposition to a mechanistic perspective; rather, it is a more complete system or more sophisticated version. Goerner portrays the mechanistic metaphor as intrinsically a

materialist hypothesis with an emphasis on physical law that, because of its lack of physical reality, cannot recognize important educational concepts that ecological understanding has incorporated, such as ethics, caring, wisdom, spirituality, morality, and so on. Mechanism focuses on separability and simple causation; for example, mechanism might view heart disease as a matter of cholesterol level. An ecological world view focuses on interdependence of relationships and complex causation. Merry (1995) illustrates this interdependence of relationships between entities within a system using the example of heart disease in relation to multiple factors such as: genetic predisposition, lifestyle, high blood pressure, obesity, smoking, high cholesterol, diabetes, and a combination of additional factors. Caine and Caine (1997b) propose that interdependence is the nature of all ecological relationships and refer to how the "success of the whole community depends on the success of its individual members, while the success of each member depends on the success of the community as a whole" (p. 17).

The participants in this study described their practice as being influenced and changed by the assistant's relationship to the teacher's practice and to the context of the classroom environment. They also described the multiple factors that affect these relationships, and their descriptions of the events suggest that the origin of these events cannot be traced to a single cause because they are the result of the simultaneous interaction of several factors at any given time. This suggests that the assistant's practice is not shaped by a linear, specific cause–specific effect relationship, in which "one element is understood to influence or change the other at a particular moment or in a particular circumstance but is not itself changed" (Germain & Bloom, 1999, p. 10). Rather, the assistant's practice is shaped by the relationships among the elements within

the context of the learning environment. This approach emphasizes the interdependence and interconnectivity of these relationships and the complex causation among the elements; that is, mutual effects, circular effects, chains of effects. If one element is changed, another element within the whole is affected (Goerner, 1994).

Within inclusive classrooms we must reconceptualize the nature of the relationship of the whole and the parts. We cannot build a strong community of practice in classrooms without authentically including educational assistants as full staff members and students with severe behavior disorders as full class members.

The basis of new science is a focus on a holistic understanding of relationships between seemingly discrete parts of the whole system. Capra (1996) stated that all members of an ecological community are interconnected in a vast and intricate network of relationships. Interdependence or the mutual dependence of members of a community on one another creates an awareness of multiple relationships and their impact on one another. Elements of a system mutually affect and are affected by each other. The assistant works within a classroom, which is a part of a school, which is part of a school district, which is part of Alberta Learning; each of which is defined within physical boundaries. As Germain and Bloom (1999) suggested, "These relationships are characterized by continuous reciprocal exchanges, or transactions, in which people and environments influence, shape, and sometimes change each other" (p. 10). Merry (1995) proposed that complex systems cannot exist in isolation. By their very nature they are tied to and connected to other systems, thus creating a dense web of connections with the broader complex systems in which they are embedded. The practice of educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders in inclusive classrooms

affects and is affected by relationships with staff and students in the classroom and in other parts of the school. As an administrator mentioned to Leanne, a participant in this study, who was working with a student with challenging behavior, "When you have a bad day, the whole school knows about it."

Capra (1996) pointed out that throughout the living world are numerous examples of systems nesting within other systems, and we must recognize that different systems represent different complexities and that none of the systems is more fundamental than the others. Each system exhibits emergent properties that do not exist in other systems but emerge within that particular system. Capra described a systems perspective as a contextual perspective. Viewing things in terms of their context means describing them in terms of their environment.

The Influence of Systems

Bates (1997) refers to a system as a "bounded entity" composed of separate interrelated parts that connect in such a way as to be "interdependent and to affect each other and thereby relate to their environment as an integrated whole" (p. 124). Kellor and Golley (2000) suggest an entity exists as a discrete unit and can be distinctly separated from the background matrix in which it is bounded. The authors determine this property of boundedness involves a recognizable difference between the properties of an entity and those of the matrix in which it is located. Bates (1997) maintains this concept of boundary is used to isolate the interconnected set of parts that are dependent for their existence on a common structural mechanism from other parts that are not constrained by the same mechanism. Kellor and Golley (2000) suggest that ecological systems derive as

much of their essence from their connections to the environment of the system as from the interactions among the parts of the system.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) portrayed human development from an ecological perspective in order to describe the mutual accommodation of individuals to the changing properties of the setting of which the individual is a part and discussed "how this process is affected by the relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (p. 21). The nature of the relationship between the individual and the environment must be viewed as dynamic in that both the individual and the situation change over time. The concept of environment is extended to incorporate not only the immediate situation but also interconnections between nested settings that also influence the situation.

A comparison can be made between the participants' descriptions of the nature of their practice and Bronfenbrenner's seminal work in relation to his descriptions of an ecological model of human development nested within levels of influence within the social context. For educational assistants, the context determines the nature of their practice (see Figure 2).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the environment in terms of four interrelated systems composed of properties specific to each level that influence the individual's behavior and actions within the immediate setting. These structures are referred to in relation to their proximity to the individual as micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems. These four Greek prefaces come from micro—*mikro,* meaning small; meso—*meso,* meaning midway; exo—*exo* meaning outside; and macro—*makro,* meaning large (*Chambers*, 2000).

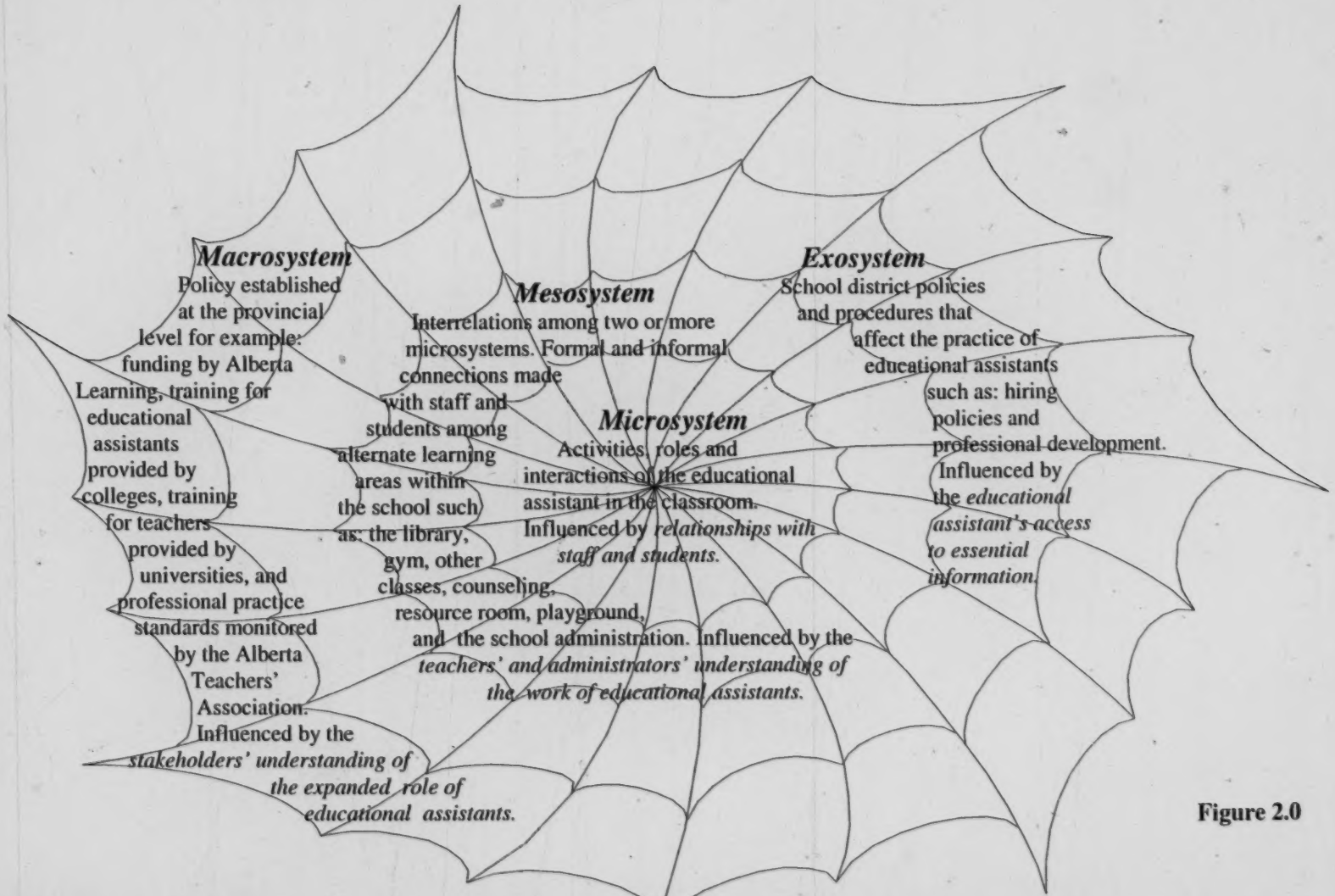

Macrosystem
Policy established at the provincial level for example: funding by Alberta Learning, training for educational assistants provided by colleges, training for teachers provided by universities, and professional practice standards monitored by the Alberta Teachers' Association. Influenced by the stakeholders' understanding of the expanded role of educational assistants.
Mesosystem
Interrelations among two or more microsystems. Formal and informal connections made with staff and students among alternate learning areas within the school such as: the library, gym, other classes, counseling, resource room, playground, and the school administration. Influenced by the teachers' and administrators' understanding of the work of educational assistants.
Microsystem
Activities, roles and interactions of the educational assistant in the classroom. Influenced by relationships with staff and students.
Exosystem
School district policies and procedures that affect the practice of educational assistants such as: hiring policies and professional development. Influenced by the educational assistant's access to essential information.

Figure 2.0

Ecological Web of Nested Educational Systems Influencing the Practice of Educational Assistants- Adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979)

The *microsystem* is "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21). In this study the microsystem refers to the inclusive classroom in which the educational assistant participates and interacts daily. Experiences within the microsystem shape assistants' skills, beliefs, and attitudes related to the context of their practice.

The *mesosystem* represents the "interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25) or the connections among different Microsystems. In this study the mesosystem represents alternate learning locations within the school. Educational assistants typically work in schools that are composed of several classrooms and alternate learning sites, such as the library, gym, resource room, and so on, that the assistant may access for students during the day. Strong and positive connections between two or more microsystems can provide a supportive context for the educational assistant to meet the needs of the student with severe behavior; for example, when the assistant and the student with severe behavior can join other classes for activities, when school administrators support the behavior plan for the student, and when other staff can support the behavior plan during nonstructured activities such as recess.

The *exosystem* refers to "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Within this study, the exosystem is represented by school district policies and procedures. Events within the exosystem reverberate to influence situations and

circumstances in the microsystem; for example, union policies of "bumping" related to seniority, parent support or lack of support for the child's school program, school district professional development opportunities made available, or financial support for districtwide professional development days.

The *macrosystem* refers to "consistencies, in the form or content of the micro, meso and exo systems that exist, at the level of the culture as a whole, along with belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26). In this study, the macrosystem is the most distal system form affecting the assistant in the classroom, reflecting the broad ideological and institutional patterns in our society, including economic and political environments. For example, Alberta Learning funding policies reflect beliefs in our society on how students with severe behavior disorders will be funded, how university teacher training programs affect teacher preparation for working with assistants, and how postsecondary educational assistant training programs affect how assistants are prepared for these positions.

Just as Bronfenbrenner (1979) found that systems in the environment affect the development of an individual, so too do the associated micro, meso, exo, and macro systems within education influence the nature of the practice of educational assistants. The practice of educational assistants can be conceptualized as existing within four interdependent, nested systems. Each system within this nested structure consists of a physical milieu, activities, individuals with specific roles, and resources (Berger, McBreen, & Rifkin, 1996). Multiple expectations, constraints, and opportunities influence each of the four systems through a web of nonlinear relationships.

Blair and Caine (1995) described how events occur within an environment, under certain conditions and circumstances, within a situational moment. They suggested that the situation cannot be separated from the experience. Educators have known the importance of the environment in relation to the interpretation of the meaning of events and interactions for a long time. However, educators have traditionally used the mechanistic model to view the environment as something external to the individual that can be controlled and manipulated in order to achieve a desirable outcome. Blair and Caine (1995) asserted, "The context of a situation is always a part of the situation itself" (p. 19). The situated nature of the practice of educational assistants who are assigned to students with severe behavior disorders in regular classrooms must be understood in the context of the relationships within the social and physical structure of the classroom, the school, and the school district that frame and inform their daily work. Both the educational assistant's practice and the program for students with severe behavior disorders are highly dependent on the context of the classroom, the school, and the school division.

Goerner (1994) commented that the Western world is moving away from a Newtonian clockwork-machine view of the universe toward a view of a living, evolving, ecological universe. The shift represents a change in the dominant metaphor of how the world works. There are no separate problems any more. Optimizing the potential contribution of educational assistants who are assigned to classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders, requires classroom staff to work together in schools from an ecological perspective, focusing on both the individual and the environment.

How the practice of the educational assistant is interpreted and supported in the classroom can be related to multiple factors and is dependent on the teacher's and administrator's understanding and valuing of the assistant's position, the strength of the relationships the assistant builds with staff and students, the teacher's and administrator's support of the expanded role of assistants within the context of the classroom and the school, and the information available to the educational assistant in relation to his/her position. The interrelatedness of the educational assistant's role with other staff members combined with the strong influence of the learning environment confirms that to support and retain educational assistants we must view their practice from an ecological perspective, which considers individuals as "members of ecological communities bound together in a network of interdependencies" (Capra, 1996, p. 11). To understand the practice of educational assistants, we must understand not only the individual assistant, but also the context in which the individual works.

There is a need to understand classrooms as living systems in terms of complex, nonlinear networks, which will likely lead to new insights into the challenges that teachers, educational assistants, and administrators face in today's educational environment. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the major challenges we face in education cannot be understood in isolation. As we let go of the mechanistic models of classrooms that focus on hierarchical authority-based structures designed to separate classroom staff into manageable units, we can begin to step forward, appreciate our wholeness and develop new ways of helping classroom staff work together as teams to honor and make use of their potential capacity.

Recommendations for the Field

Chamchuk (1973) identified as a problem the concern of how to "demarcate" tasks exclusively to educational assistants within classrooms, and the problem is even more apparent within inclusive classrooms today. We cannot reduce the complexity of the human interactions and learning activities that occur within an inclusive classroom on any given day to a distinct list of descriptors allocated to the teacher *or* to the educational assistant. What occurs more frequently is that many of these daily tasks are carried out by the teacher *and* the educational assistant, depending on the situation. There is a need to view teachers and educational assistants working together in terms of a web of mutually supportive, interdependent relationships rather than in terms of hierarchical, authoritative classroom relationships.

Because the nature of the educational assistant's practice is highly interrelated with the practice of the teacher, it is recommended that systems external to the classroom, such as school boards, Alberta Learning, and the ATA focus their efforts on helping teachers to work effectively with educational assistants by facilitating the development of mutually supportive relationships rather than by focusing on maintaining the hierarchical authority-based structures that currently frame classroom practice.

The participants in this study strongly endorsed the need for students with severe behavior disorders to have trained and/or experienced educational assistants working with them to meet their academic, social, and emotional needs. This, combined with the reality of the shortage of trained/experienced educational assistants to fill these positions, suggests that it is important for school boards to look for ways to retain effective assistants within their districts. The participants referred to the need for stakeholders

(teachers, administrators, school board personnel, and representatives of unions, Alberta Learning, and the ATA) to view the position of educational assistants as a viable career and to look for ways to support valued employees who want to stay in the field. Recommendations made by the participants in this study in regard to retaining effective assistants in the field include the following:

- School boards must create a framework for a preservice "orientation module" for educational assistants that could be customized to meet the needs of individual schools. They suggested that the package could include information such as district and school policies and procedures pertaining to classroom practice, expectations of ethical behavior, legal rights and responsibilities, freedom of information and privacy and examples of its connection to daily classroom practice, resources available through the district, and ways to work together effectively as a classroom team.
- Stakeholders must understand that a minimal standard of training is required for educational assistants to support classroom teachers and their students with special needs and to work to establish a scope of practice identifying core competencies of the position in relation to qualifications, supervision, evaluation, and training.
- Stakeholders must consider the human resource issues identified within this study and in order to value and understand how educational assistants can be supported to do their job effectively, so that they are able to serve the needs of teachers and students with whom they work. Educational assistants are generally highly committed classroom staff who are typically assigned to

work with students who have the greatest educational challenges and yet often educational assistants are treated as though they are expendable.

- Educational assistants must receive regularly scheduled, formal evaluations of their classroom work in order to provide educational assistants feedback about how they are doing and how they can strengthen their practice, as well educational assistants need the opportunity to provide feedback to the teacher through a formal process.
- Professional development committees within school districts must recognize the depth of knowledge and experience held by educational assistants who are working in the field and seek ways to enable assistants to share this information and network with one another through compensated professional development time. It is further recommended that school boards view professional development for educational assistants as a process rather than as a separately scheduled event because the nature of their practice requires ongoing learning opportunities.
- Teachers who are working with educational assistants must have access to preservice or inservice sessions focused on learning how to work effectively with an educational assistant. The participants suggested that the inservice sessions should ideally be held prior to the assistant's starting his or her work in the classroom and should include the assistant, so that the teacher and the assistant can develop a shared understanding of the expectations of the position and the concept of team work in the classroom. It is recommended that school districts identify the ongoing professional development needs of

educational assistants within their district and then begin to develop integrated strands of preservice and inservice professional development with other stakeholders.

- Postsecondary institutions providing certification for educational assistants must collaborate with school boards to increase opportunities for uncertified educational assistants who are working in the field to access training and must provide advanced standing equivalencies for related course work for assistants who have demonstrated exemplary work in the field for an extensive period of time. These postsecondary institutions could collaborate with school boards to provide some course work through inservice professional development sessions held in conjunction with the district professional development days throughout the school year. It was also recommended that postsecondary institutions providing certification for educational assistants develop articulation agreements to provide consistency across institutions in the training of educational assistants to enable school boards to recognize the training of educational assistants and to enable students to transfer credits among Alberta colleges. Because the practice of educational assistants is situated in the context of the classroom and in the school, it is recommended that these preparatory programs provide a context-based approach to classroom learning.
- University teacher education programs and school board inservice sessions must prepare teachers to work effectively with educational assistants because

teachers are responsible for providing direction and supervision to their assistants and could benefit from training about how to do this effectively.

- Stakeholders must view classrooms from an ecological perspective as dynamic, living systems that are nonlinear and unpredictable learning environments that require teachers and their assistants to have scheduled joint planning time to interpret and respond to events as they unfold within the classroom and to have the necessary time to revise plans for student learning outcomes.

Reflections on the Research

This research study has given me the opportunity to work with six incredibly talented, dedicated educational assistants. Their willingness to share their combined knowledge and experience to help others understand the nature of their practice was exemplary. When I began gathering the data for the study, it became immediately apparent how important it was to take note of the knowledge and experience of the educational assistants related to the nature of their practice. These six individuals demonstrated that they had a wealth of information to share, within a spirit of collaboration, in their effort to help to enhance the educational experiences of the students with whom they work and the teaching experiences of the teachers they support.

When I started this research I did not realize how highly interrelated the practice of the educational assistant is in relation to the practice of the teacher and the views held by the school administration. There are few jobs that exist today in which individuals must ask permission to do their work. Yet in many classrooms this is the still basis of the educational assistant's practice.

After listening to the participants share their knowledge and experience in relation to their work with students with severe behavior disorders, I could not help but wonder if part of the reason that these educational assistants were so successful in their work and were so committed to their students was, that the assistants themselves knew what it was like to be 'excluded' and to feel 'not valued' by the education system of which they are a part.

The practice of educational assistants is situated in the context of the classroom "it cannot be adequately understood apart from the context in which it occurs" (Merriam, 2001, p. 46). There is no definitive list of the duties that educational assistants are expected to carry out, which means that teachers and their assistants are frequently in a position of having to interpret the assistant's role within the context of the learning situation. The need for this situational interpretation of practice requires teachers to clearly understand the role of the educational assistant in relation to their own role within the classroom. As educational assistants fulfill their responsibilities through their mutual engagement with the teacher in the classroom, their daily practice often becomes a collectively negotiated response to what the teacher and the educational assistant interpret to be the assistant's role within the particular situation. As a result, the teacher and educational assistant work together to create a unique joint practice based on their negotiation of shared meaning.

Geertz (1995) reported that how we construct our sense of reality "comes inevitably out of the way we talk about it" (p. 18). My conversations with the participants in this study changed my world view of work relationships. I have come to a different level of understanding of the value and importance of developing, maintaining,

and sustaining relationships within the workplace. As well, I have a much deeper understanding of the influence of both the teacher and the school administrator on the practice of the educational assistant and on what is required from both of these positions to support the educational assistant's practice in the classroom and the school. Viewing classrooms from an ecological perspective as living systems has transformed my understanding of the structure of classroom relationships, the nature of the planning process, and the energy associated with disruptive classroom behavior. I find myself rethinking how postsecondary institutions must change the preservice training of educational assistants to effectively support both teachers and students within the context of the classroom.

The participants of this study identified what they needed to do their work effectively and included solutions from their perspectives to the challenges they viewed as limiting their contribution to the classroom. Many of the suggestions that the educational assistants made do not require additional funding but do require a change in perspective held by stakeholders of the practice of educational assistants.

This qualitative study does not claim to generalize its findings across situations. It is my hope that the information provided in this study will resonate with educational assistants in the field who can see their needs reflected in some vital way. I especially hope that readers of this study may gain a deeper understanding of the practice of educational assistants who are working in inclusive classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders and therefore may connect parts of this information to their own practice to realize ways in which they may better support the work of educational assistants.

Recommendations for Further Research

The participants in this study strongly emphasized the need for teachers and educational assistants to work together as collaborative teams in order to meet the diverse needs of students with severe behavior disorders. This study has addressed this need in part. However, it is recommended that qualitative researchers further probe this area to better understand how successful classroom teams develop.

This study was designed to understand the nature of the practice of educational assistants from their perspective. I have barely touched the surface in this area and feel that there is much more work that needs to be done. I would encourage other researchers to continue seeking to understand this phenomenon, and I would suggest the inclusion of the perspective of the teacher to determine what teachers need in order to work effectively with educational assistants.

REFERENCES

Alberta. (2000). *Student health partnership: Student health initiative planning guide 2000/2001.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Education. (1995). *Guide to education for students with special needs.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Education. (1998). *First things first . . . Our children.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Learning. (1999). *Student information system user's guide.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Learning. (2000). *Alberta Learning special needs statistics.* Edmonton, AB: Special Education Branch.

Alberta Teachers' Association. (1967). *Teacher aides: ATA policy: Summaries of reports further study and action required.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Teachers' Association. (1973). Position paper: Teachers' aides. *Members' handbook.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Teachers' Association. (1993). *Position paper: Teachers' assistants.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Alberta Teachers' Association. (2000). *Teacher assistant: Roles and responsibilities.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

ATA Monograph. (2003). *Teachers' rights, responsibilities, and legal liabilities: Noncertificated personnel.* Edmonton, AB: Alberta Teachers' Association.

Algozzine, B., Maheady, L., Sacca, K. C., O'Shea, L., & O'Shea, D. (1990). Sometimes patent medicine works: A reply to Braaten, Kauffman, Braaten, Polsgrove, and Nelson. *Exceptional Children, 56,* 552-557.

Andrews, J., & Lupart, J. (2000). *The inclusive classroom: Educating exceptional children.* Toronto: Nelson.

Arrien, A. (1993). *The four-fold way: Walking the paths of the warrior, teacher, healer, and visionary.* San Francisco: Harper Collins.

Autry, J. (1991). *Love and profit: The art of caring leadership.* New York: William Morrow.

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* New York: W. H. Freeman.

Barker, J. (1992). *Paradigms: The business of discovering the future.* New York: Harper Collins.

Barth, R. (1990). *Improving schools from within.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bassett, D. S., Jackson, L., Ferrell, K. A., Luckner, J., Hagerty, P. J., Bunsen, T. D., & MacIsaac, D. (1996). Multiple perspectives on inclusive education. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 19*(4), 355-386.

Bates, F. (1997). *Sociopolitical ecology: Human systems and ecological fields.* New York: Plenum Press.

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature.* New York: Dutton.

Bauwens, J., & Mueller, P. H. (2000). Maximizing the mindware of human resources. In R. A. Villa & J. S. Thousand (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.; pp. 328-359). Toronto: Paul H. Brookes.

Bennis, W. (1997). *Managing people is like herding cats.* Provo, UT: Executive Excellence.

Berger, R. L., McBreen, J. T., & Rifkin, M. J. (1966). *Human behavior: A perspective for the helping professions.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

Bettelheim, B. (1960). *The informed heart.* New York: Macmillan.

Black, D. B., & Bunyan, L. W. (1973). *Staff differentiation.* Edmonton: Alberta Department of Education.

Blair, B., & Caine, R. (1995). *Integrative learning as the pathway to teaching holism, complexity, and interconnectedness.* Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Toronto: Allyn and Bacon.

Boss, W. (1978). Trust and managerial problem solving revisited. *Group and Organizational Studies, 3*(3), 331-342.

Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Braaten, S., Kauffman, J. M., Braaten, B., Polsgrove, L., & Nelson, C. M. (1988). The regular education initiative: Patent medicine for behavioral disorders. *Exceptional Children, 55*(1), 21-27.

Bradfield, H. R., Brown, J., Kaplan, P., Rickert, E., & Stannard, R. (1973). The special child in the regular classroom. *Exceptional Children, 39,* 384-390.

Brandt, R. S. (2000). *Education in a new era.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brooks, B. L., & Sabatino, D. A. (1996). *Personal perspectives on emotional disturbance/behavioral disorders.* Austin, TX: ProEd.

Brown, S., & Eisenhardt, K. (1998). *Competing on the edge.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Brunard, V., & Kleiner, B. (1994). Development trustful and cooperative relationships. *Leadership and Organizational Development Journal, 15*(2), 3-5.

Bruner, J. (1966). *Toward a theory of instruction.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Budoff, M., & Gottlieb, J. (1976). Special class students mainstreamed: A study of an aptitude (learning potential) x treatment interaction. *American Journal of Mental Deficiency, 81*(1), 1-11.

Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1997a). *Education on the edge of possibility.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Caine, R. N., & Caine, G. (1997b). *Unleashing the power of perceptual change: The potential of brain-based teaching.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Canadian Oxford dictionary. (1998). Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Canning, C. (1992). Interpretive inquiry: If you are going to use it, you will be doing it. In N. L. Haggerson & A. C. Bowman (Eds.), *Information educational policy and practice through interpretive inquiry* (pp. 61-82). Lancaster, PA: Technomic.

Capra, F. (1975). *The Tao of physics.* London: Flamingo Press.

Capra, F. (1982). *The turning point: Science, society, and the rising culture.* Toronto: Bantam Books.

Capra, F. (1996). *The web of life: A new scientific understanding of living systems.* Toronto: Doubleday.

Capra, F. (2002). *The hidden connections: Integrating the biological, cognitive, and social dimensions of life into a science of sustainability.* New York: Doubleday.

Carretta, T., & Moreland, R. (1982). Nixon and Watergate: A field demonstration of belief perseverance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 8,* 446-453.

Cashman, K. (1998). *Leadership from the inside out.* Provo, UT: Executive Excellence.

Chambers dictionary of etymology. (2000). (R. Barnhart, Ed.). New York: H. W. Wilson.

Chamchuk, N. J. (1973). *Certificated teachers and paraprofessionals: A statement of issues in Alberta and proposals for policy development.* Edmonton, AB: Department of Education.

Chappell, T. (1993). *The soul of a business: Managing for profit and the common good.* New York: Bantam Books.

Cirocco, G. (2001). *Take the step: The bridge will be there: Inspiration and guidance for moving your life forward.* Toronto: Harper Collins.

Cole, M. M., & Cole, S. R. (1989). *The development of children.* San Francisco: Freeman.

Coleman, M. C., & Gilliam, J. E. (1983). Disturbing behaviors in the classroom: A survey of teacher attitudes. *Journal of Special Education, 17*(2), 122-129.

Colenso, M. (2000). Kaizen and the team: The great symbiosis. In M. Colenso (Ed.), *Kaizen strategies for improving team performance: How to accelerate team development and enhance team productivity* (pp. 41-56). London: Pearson Education.

Collins, J., & Porras, J. (1994). *Built to last.* New York: Harper Business.

Cook, J., & Wall, T. (1980). New work attitude measures of trust, organizational commitment, and personal need non-fulfillment. *Journal of Occupational Psychology, 53,* 39-52.

Costa, A., & Garmston, R. (2002). *Cognitive coaching: A foundation for Renaissance schools.* Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Costa, A., & Liebmann, R. (1997). Preface to the trilogy. In A. Costa & R. Liebmann (Eds.), *The process-centered school: Sustaining a Renaissance community* (pp. xiii-xx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Council on Alberta Teaching Standards. (2001). *Principles to guide teachers supported by teacher assistants.* Edmonton, AB: Author.

Csapo, M., & Goguen , L. (Eds.). (1980). *Special education across Canada: Issues and concerns for the '80s.* Vancouver: Center for Human Development and Research.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* New York: Harper Collins.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1993). *The evolving self: Psychology for the third millennium.* New York: Harper Collins.

Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (1999). *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Deno, E. (Ed.). (1973). *Instructional alternatives for exceptional children.* Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Donaldson, G. (2001). *Cultivating leadership in schools: Connecting people, purpose, and practice.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Driscoll, J. (1978). Trusted participation in organizational decision making as predictor of satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal, 21*(1), 44-56.

Drummond, H. (2000). *Introduction to organizational behavior.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Eisner, E. N. (1991). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice.* Toronto: Macmillan.

Elmore, R., & Burney, D. (1999). Investing in teacher learning: Staff development and instructional improvement. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as the learning profession: Handbook of policy and practice* (p. 236-291). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Erickson, E. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Executive Secretary of the Alberta Teachers' Association. (1959, March). The Condor case. *ATA Magazine*, pp. 1-4.

Fazio, R., & Williams, C. (1986). Attitude accessibility as a moderator of the attitude-perception and attitude-behavior relations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 51,* 505-514.

Fessler, M. A., Rosenberg, M. S., & Rosenberg, L. A. (1991). Concomitant learning disabilities and learning problems among students with emotional/behavioral disorders. *Behavioral Disorders, 16,* 97-106.

Forest, M. (1988). Full inclusion is possible. *Impact, 1,* 3-4.

Fullan, M. (1999). *Change forces: The sequel.* Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a culture of change.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gallwey, W. T. (2000). *The inner game of work.* Toronto: Random House.

Gardiner, J. J. (1998). Quiet presence: The holy ground of leadership. In L. Spears (Ed.), *Insights on leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant-leadership* (p. 116-125). Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Garmston, R., & Wellman, B. (1997). Developing adaptive schools in a quantum universe. In A. Costa & R. Liebman (Eds.), *The process-centered school: Sustaining a Renaissance community* (pp. 101-118). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Garner, H. (1995). *Team work models and experience in education.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Garnett, K. (1996). *Thinking about inclusion and learning disabilities: A teacher's guide.* Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Gartner, A. (1971). *Paraprofessionals and their performance: A survey of education, health, and social service programs.* New York: Praeger.

Gartner, A., & Lipsky, D. (1987). Beyond special education. *Harvard Educational Review, 57,* 367-395.

Gartner, A., & Lipsky, D. (2000). Inclusion and school restructuring. In R. Villa & J. Thousand (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (pp. 38-55). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Geertz, C. (1995). *After the fact: Two countries, four decades, one anthropologist.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Germain, C., & Bloom, M. (1999). *Human behavior in the social environment: An ecological view* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.

Gharajedaghi, J. (1999). *Systems thinking: Managing chaos and complexity: A platform for designing business architecture.* Boston: Butterworths-Heinemann.

Glickman, C. D. (2002). *Leadership for learning: How to help teachers succeed.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

GMCC, RDC, MHC, & ATA. (1998). *Teacher Assistant Role Designation Survey.* Edmonton, AB: GMCC, Teacher Assistant Program.

Goerner, S. J. (1994). *Chaos and the evolving ecological universe.* Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach.

Green, J. E., & Barnes, D. L. (1989). Do your "aides" aid in instruction? A tool of reassessing the use of paraprofessionals as instructional assistants. *The Teacher Educator, 24*(3), 2-9.

Guskey, T. R. (1995). Professional development in education: In search of the optimal mix. In T. R. Guskey & M. Huberman (Eds.), *Professional development in education: New paradigms and practices* (p. 114-132). New York: Columbia University, Teachers College.

Hackman, R. (1990). *Groups that work and those that don't.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Handy, C. (1994). *The age of paradox.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Hanson, D. (1997). *Cultivating common ground: Releasing the power of relationships at work.* Boston: Butterworths-Heinemann.

Hardy, M. I., McLeod, J., Minto, H., Perkins, S. A., & Quance, W. R. (1971). *Standards for education of exceptional children in Canada: The SEECC report.* Toronto: Leonard Crainford.

Hargreaves, A. (1994). *Changing teachers, changing times: Teachers' work and culture in a postmodern age.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Haring, N., Stern, G., & Cruikshank, W. (1958). *Attitudes of educators toward exceptional children.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

Harris, K. C. (1990). Meeting diverse needs through collaborative consultation. In W. Stainback & S. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education* (p. 139-150). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Helgesen, S. (1990). *The female advantage: Women's ways of leadership.* New York: Doubleday.

Helgesen, S. (1995). *The web of inclusion.* New York: Doubleday.

Hesselbein, F., Goldsmith, M., & Somerville, I. (1999). *Leading beyond the walls.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Higashi, M., & Burns, T. (1991). *Theoretical studies of ecosystems: The network perspective.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hillier, R. P. (1979). *Teacher aides: Training, utilization, and satisfaction.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Huber, D. (2000). *Leadership and nursing care management.* Toronto: W. B. Saunders.

Idol, L., Nevin, A. & Paolucci-Whitcomb, P. (1993). *Collaborative consultation* (2nd ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Idol, L., Nevin, A., & Paolucci-Whitcomb, P. (1999). *Collaborative consultation* (3rd ed.). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

Institute for Education and Transformation. (1992). *Voices from the inside: A report on schooling from inside the classroom—Part I: Naming the problem.* Claremont, CA: Claremont Graduate School.

Jantsch, E. (1980). *The self-organizing universe.* Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Johnson, A. (1987). Attitudes toward mainstreaming: Implications for inservice training and teaching the handicapped. *Education, 107,* 229-233.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1984). Classroom learning structure and attitudes toward handicapped students in mainstream settings: A theoretical model and research evidence. In R. Jones (Ed.), *Attitudes and attitude change in special education* (pp. 118-142). Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1989). *Cooperation and competition: Theory and research.* Edina, MN: Interaction.

Jones, K. H., & Bender, W. N. (1993). Utilization of paraprofessionals in special education: A review of the literature. *Remedial and Special Education, 14*(1), 7-14.

Joyce, B., & Showers, B. (1995). *Student achievement through staff development: Fundamentals of school renewal* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.

Kanter, R. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation.* New York: Basic Books.

Karagiannis, A., & Cartwright, G. F. (1990). Attitudinal research issues in integration of children with mental handicaps. *McGill Journal of Education, 25*(3), 369-382.

Kauffman, J. M. (1990). Restructuring in sociopolitical context: Reservations about the effects of current reform proposals on students with disabilities. In J. W. Lloyd, A. C. Repp., & N. N. Singh (Eds.), *The regular education initiative: Alternate perspectives on concepts, issues, and models* (p. 57-66). Sycamore, IL: Sycamore.

Kauffman, S. (1995). *At home in the universe: The search for the laws of self-organization and complexity.* New York: Oxford University press.

Keiny, S. (2002). *Ecological thinking: A new approach to educational change.* Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Keller, D., & Golley, F. (2000). *The philosophy of ecology: From science to synthesis.* Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Kepner-Tregoe. (1995). *People and their jobs: What's real, what's rhetoric?* Princeton, NJ: Author.

Klatt, B., Murphy, S., & Irvine, D. (1998). *Accountability: Getting a grip on results* (2nd ed.). Calgary, AB: Red Stone.

Klein, E., & Izzo, J. (1998). *Awakening the corporate soul: Four paths to unleash the power of people at work.* New York: Midpoint Trade Books.

Kline, P., & Saunders, B. (1998). *Ten steps to a learning organization.* Arlington, VA: Great Ocean.

Knitzer, J., Steinberg, Z., & Fleisch, B. (1990). *At the schoolhouse door.* New York: Bank Street College of Education.

Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (1995). *The leadership challenge: How to keep getting extraordinary things done in organizations.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Krueger, R. A. (1998). *Analyzing and reporting focus group researching: Focus group kit 6.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

LaFasto, F., & Larson, C. (2001). *When teams work best: 6,000 team members and leaders tell what it takes to succeed.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Larson, C. E., & LaFasto, F. M. (1989). *Team work: What must go right/What can go wrong.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Lave, J. (1993). The practice of learning. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 3-34). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Leedy, P. D. (1997). *Practical research: Planning and design* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Lepsinger, R., & Lucia, A. (1997). *The art and science of 360° feedback.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Levering, R., & Morkowitz, M. (1993). *100 best companies to work for in America.* New York: Currency/Doubleday.

Lewin, R., & Regine, B. (2001). *Weaving complexity and business: Engaging the soul at work.* New York: Textere.

Lieberman, A., & Miller, L. (1999). *Teachers transforming their world and their work.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Liebmann, R. (1997). How process is connected with the human spirit. In A. Costa & R. Liebmann (Eds.), *Envisioning process as content: Toward a Renaissance curriculum* (pp. 50-62). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Lincoln, R., Boxshall, G., & Clark, P. (1998). *A dictionary of ecology, evolution and systematics* (2nd ed.). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (1987). Capable of achievement and worthy of respect: Education for handicapped students as if they were full-fledged human beings. *Exceptional Children, 54,* 69-74.

Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (1989). *Beyond separate education: Quality education for all.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Lipsky, D. K., & Gartner, A. (1997). *Inclusion and school reform: Transforming America's classrooms.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Lord, C., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. (1979). Biased assimilation and attitude polarization: The effects of prior theories on subsequently considered evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 37,* 2098-2109.

Lupart, J. L. (1987). Mainstreaming: What do teachers think? *Calgary Regional Special Education Council Newsletter, 1*(1), 10-11.

MacMillan, D. L., Gresham, F. M,. & Forness, S. R. (1996). Full inclusion: An empirical perspective. *Behavior Disorders, 21,* 145-159.

Madden, N., & Slavin, R. (1983). Mainstreaming students with mild academic handicaps: Academic and social outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 53,* 519-569.

Marcic, D. (1997). *Managing with the wisdom of love: Uncovering virtue in people and organizations.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1995). *Designing qualitative research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mastropieri, M., Jenkins, V., & Scruggs, T. (1985). Academic and intellectual characteristics of behavior disordered children and youth. In R. B. Rutherford (Ed.), *Severe behavior disorders of children and youth* (Vol. 8, p. 86-104). Reston, VA: Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders.

Mathieu, J., & Zajac, D. (1990). A review and meta analysis of the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of organizational commitment. *Psychological Bulletin, 107,* 171-194.

McKenzie, L. (1991). *Adult education and world view construction.* Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Melrose, K. (1998). Putting servant-leadership into practice. In L. Spears (Ed.), *Insights on leadership: Service, stewardship, spirit, and servant-leadership* (p. 279-295). Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Merriam, S. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merry, U. (1995). *Coping with uncertainty: Insights for the new sciences of chaos, self-organization, and complexity.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Meyer, J., & Allen, N. (1997). *Commitment in the workplace: Theory, research, and application.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyers, D. (1987). *Social psychology.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Michell, L. (1999). Combining focus groups and interviews: Telling how it is; telling how it feels. In R. Barbour & J. Kitzinger (Eds.), *Developing focus group research: Politics, theory, and practice* (pp. 36-46). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mitchell, D. A. (1973). *A Survey and analysis of teacher aide programs.* Unpublished master's thesis, University of Alberta, Edmonton.

Mooney, C., & Algozzine, R. (1978). A comparison of the disturbingness of behaviors related to learning disability and emotional disturbance. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 6,* 401-406.

Morgan, D. L. (1998). *The focus group guidebook: Focus group kit 1.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morgan, G. (1997). *Images of organization* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Morrison, K. (2002). *School leadership and complexity theory.* New York: Routledge/Falmer.

Mowday, R., Porter, L., & Steers, R. (1982). *Employee-organization linkages, the psychology of commitment, absenteeism, and turnover.* London: Academic Press.

National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion. (1994). *National study on inclusive education.* New York: Author.

National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion. (1995). *National study on inclusive education.* New York: Author.

Nevin, A. I., Thousand, J. S., Paolucci-Whitcomb, P., & Villa, R. A. (1990). Collaborative consultation: Empowering public school personnel to provide heterogeneous schooling for all. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation, 1*(1), 41-67.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Noddings, N. (1992). *The challenge to care in the schools: An Alternative approach to education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Nonaka, I.,. & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company.* New York: Oxford University Press.

O'Brien, J., & Forest, M. (1989). *Action for inclusion.* Toronto: Inclusion Press.

O'Brien, J., & O'Brien, C. (1994). *Everybody's here, now we can begin.* Lithonia, GA: Responsive Systems Associates.

O'Connor, J., & McDermott, I. (1997). *The art of systems thinking: Essential skills for creativity and problem solving.* San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins.

Parish, T., Dyck, W., & Kappes, B. (1979). Stereotypes concerning normal and handicapped children. *The Journal of Psychology, 102,* 63-70.

Patterson, J. L., Purkey, S. C., & Parker, J. V. (1986). *Productive school systems for a nonrational world.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Pence, A. R. (1988). *Ecological research with children and families: From concepts to methodology.* New York: Teachers' College Press.

Peppers, C., & Briskin, A. (2000). *Bringing your soul to work: An everyday practice.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Peters, T., & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence: Lessons from America's best-run companies.* New York: Harper & Row.

Pfeffer, J. (1998). *The human equation: Building profits by putting people first.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Pfeiffer, S. I., & Reddy, L. A. (1998). School-based mental health programs in the United States: Present status and a blueprint for the future. *School Psychology Review, 27*(1), 84-96.

Pickett, A. L. (1994). *Paraprofessionals in the education workforce.* Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Pickett, A. L. (1997). Paraeducators in school settings: Framing the issues. In A. L. Pickett & K. Gerlack (Eds.), *Supervising paraeducators in school settings: A team approach* (pp. 1-24). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Pickett, S. T., Kolasa, J., & Jones, C. (1994). *Ecological understanding: The nature of theory and the theory of nature.* New York: Academic Press.

Pike, K. (1954). *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior.* The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.

Pugach, M. C., & Johnson, L. J. (1990). Meeting diverse needs through professional peer collaboration. In W. Stainback & S. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education* (p. 123-137). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Rainforth, B., & York-Barr, J. (1997). *Collaborative teams for students with severe disabilities: Integrating therapy and educational services* (2nd ed.). Toronto: Paul H. Brooks.

Regan, D., Straus, E., & Fazio, R. (1974). Liking and the attribution process. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 10,* 385-397.

Regan, H. B. (1995). In the image of the double helix: A reconstruction of schooling. In D. Dunlap & P. Schmuck (Eds.), *Women leading in education* (p. 407-422). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Regan, H. B., & Brooks, G. H. (1995). *Out of women's experience: Creating relational leadership.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Resnick, L. (1991). Shared cognition: Thinking as social practice. In L. Resnick, J. Levine, & S. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 1-22). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Resolutions approved at the 2002 ARA. (2002). *ATA News, 36*(20), 1-23.

Reynolds, J. C., Wang, M. C., & Walberg, H. J. (1987). The necessary restructuring of special and regular education. *Exceptional Children, 53,* 391-398.

Roberts, C. A., & Lazure, M. D. (Eds.). (1970). *One million children: A national study of Canadian children with emotional and learning disorders.* Toronto: Leonard Crainford.

Robichaud, O., & Enns, R. (1980). The integration issue. In M. Csapo & L. Goguen (Eds.), *Special education across Canada: Issues and concerns for the '80s* (p. 201-214). Vancouver: Center for Human Development and Research.

Rosenholtz, S. (1989). *Teachers' workplace: The social organization of schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Rossman, G. B., & Rallis, S. (1998). *Learning in the field: An introduction to qualitative research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Sands, D. Kozleski, E., & French, N. (2000). *Inclusive education for the 21st century.* Toronto: Nelson Thomson Learning.

Sanford, N. (1982). Social psychology: Its place in personology. *American Psychologist 37*(8), 896-903.

Scruggs, T. E., & Mastropieri, M. A. (1996). Teacher perceptions of mainstreaming/ inclusion 1958-1995: A research synthesis. *Exceptional Children, 63,* 47-57.

Secretan, L. H. (1996). *Reclaiming higher ground: Creating organizations that inspire the soul.* Toronto: Macmillan.

Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Columbia University, Teachers College Press.

Senge, P. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization.* New York: Doubleday.

Senge, P. (1997). Foreword. In A. de Geus (Ed.), *The living company: Habits of survival in a turbulent business environment.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Senge, P. (2000). *Schools that learn: A fifth discipline fieldbook for educators, parents, and everyone who cares about education.* New York: Doubleday.

Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Shenkman, M. (1996). *The strategic heart: Using the new science to lead growing organizations.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Skrtic, T. (1987). The national inquiry into the future of education for students with special needs. *Counterpoint, 4*(7), 6.

Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and sustaining critical reflection in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 40*(2), 2-9.

Sparks, D., & Hirsh, S. (1997). *A new vision for staff development.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Spretnak, C. (1991). *States of grace.* New York: Harper Collins.

Stacey, R. (1996). *Strategic management and organizational dynamics* (2nd ed.). London: Pitman.

Stacey, R. (2000). *Strategic management and organizational dynamics* (3rd ed.). New York: Doubleday.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1988). Educating students with severe disabilities in regular classes. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 21,* 16-19.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1990). Inclusive schooling. In W. C. Stainback and S. B. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Interdependent integrated education* (p. 25-36). Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1992). *Curriculum considerations in inclusive classrooms: Facilitating learning for all students.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Stainback, S., & Stainback, W. (1996). *Inclusion: A guide for educators.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Stainback, S., Stainback, W., & Forest, M. (Eds.). (1989). *Educating all students in the mainstream of regular education.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Stoll, L., & Fink, D. (1996). *Changing our schools: Linking school effectiveness and school improvement.* Bristol, PA: Open University Press.

Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource* (3rd ed.). Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.

Thousand, J. S. (1990). Organizational perspectives on teacher education and renewal: A conversation with Tom Skrtic. *Teacher Education and Special Education, 13*(1), 30-35.

Thousand, J. S., & Villa, R. A. (1990). Strategies for educating learners with severe handicaps within their local home schools and communities. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 23*(3), 1-25.

Thousand, J. S., & Villa, R. A. (1995). Managing complex change toward inclusive schooling. In R. A. Villa & J. S. Thousand (Eds.), *Creating an inclusive school* (p. 51-79). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Thousand, J. S., & Villa, R. A. (2000). Collaborative teaming: A powerful tool for restructuring. In R. Villa & J. Thousand (Eds.), *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together* (2nd ed.; pp. 254-292). Toronto: Paul H. Brookes.

Thousand, J., Fox, T., Reid, R., Godek, J., Williams, W., & Fox, W. (1986). *The homecoming model: Educating students who present intensive educational challenges within regular education environments* (Monograph No. 7-1). Burlington: University of Vermont, Center for Developmental Disabilities.

Tice, L. (1995). *Smart talk for achieving your potential: 5 steps to get you from here to there.* Seattle, WAS: Publishers Press.

U.S. Department of Education. (1993). *Twelfth annual report to Congress on the implementation of the Handicapped Children's Education Act.* Washington, DC: Author.

van Manen, M. (1998). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London, ON: Althouse Press.

Vandercook, T., Fleetham, D., Sinclair, S., & Tetlie, R. (1988). Cath, Jess, Jules, and Ames: A story of friendship. *Impact, 2,* 18-19.

Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (1990). Administrative supports to promote inclusive schooling. In W. C. Stainback & S. B. Stainback (Eds.), *Support networks for inclusive schooling: Integrated interdependent education* (pp. 201-218). Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Villa, R. A., & Thousand, J. S. (2000). *Restructuring for caring and effective education: Piecing the puzzle together.* Baltimore, MA: Paul H. Brookes.

Villa, R. A., Thousand, J., Nevin, A., & Malgeri, C. (1996). Instilling collaboration for inclusive schooling as a way of doing business in public education. *Remedial and Special Education, 17*(3), 169-181.

Walker, H. M. (1979). *The acting-out child: Coping with classroom disruption.* Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Walker, H. M., Colvin, G., & Ramsey, E. (1995). *Antisocial behavior in schools: Strategies and best practices.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brookes/Cole.

Webster's encyclopedic unabridged dictionary of the English language. (1996). Toronto: Random House.

Webster's ninth new collegiate dictionary. (1987). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

Wehman, P. (1990). School to work: Elements of successful programs. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 23,* 40-43.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Wheatley, M. J. (1992). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Wheatley, M. J., & Kellner-Rogers, M. (1996). *A simpler way.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Whitehouse, F. (1951). Team work: An approach to a higher professional level. *Exceptional Children, 18*(1), 75-82.

Wilkinson, R. (1996). *Unhealthy societies.* London: Routledge.

Will, M. C. (1986). Educating children with learning problems: A shared responsibility. *Exceptional Children, 52,* 411-415.

Winzer, M. (1985). Teacher attitudes toward mainstreaming: An appraisal of the research. *B.C. Journal of Special Education, 9*(2), 149-161.

York, J., Kronberg, R., & Doyle, M. (1995). *Creating inclusive school communities.* Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Zachary, L. (2000). *The mentor's guide: Facilitating effective learning relationships.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Zimmerman, B., Lindberg, C., & Plsek, P. (2001). *Edgeware: Insights from complexity science for health care leaders.* Irving, TX: VHA.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE LETTER TO SUPERINTENDENTS

Dear _____:
(name of superintendent)

I am writing to request your consent to conduct my research as an EdD. Student with the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, within your school division. This research study has been approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. The purpose of the research is to interview educational assistants working in classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders in order to gain a deeper understanding of the essential nature of their work. Educational assistants working in these positions are the focus of this study because I feel these positions continue to be difficult to staff within school districts. As well, those assistants who are effective in these positions may carry information that when shared, could help others in the field.

The research question driving this study is: *What are the perceptions of their practice held by educational assistants working in classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders?* Supporting questions include:

1. What kinds of support do educational assistants perceive they need in order to do their job effectively?
2. What are the issues educational assistants view as related to their work?
3. What are the work-related expectations held by educational assistants in this role?
4. What roles and responsibilities do educational assistants associate with their practice?
5. What events in which they have been involved do they see as "defining moments" in their practice?

The study's structure will incorporate questions as they emerge from the responses of participants during the interviews.

Please note that I realize that asking participants to identify issues related to their work and to provide solutions to these issues from their perspective, could lead participants to develop an expectation that these issues will be acted on. Before posing these questions I will explain to participants that the purpose of these questions is to identify the issues from their perspective and I am interested in their responses as to how to resolve some of these issues. I will reinforce the fact that this is exploratory research designed to identify issues in order to increase the conscious awareness of those working in education of the needs of educational assistants, which may or may not lead to action.

It is expected that the results of this study will yield valuable information related to: retention of staff in these positions, in-service and pre-service needs, and best practices that educational assistants in other classrooms may benefit from having identified. Additional outcomes will emerge from the study as it unfolds.

You are one of two superintendents of school jurisdictions within the geographical area surrounding (name of city) that I am approaching to seek participation within this study. If you approve this research study within your school division, I request that you identify potential school sites within your Division where educational assistants are assigned to work with students with severe behavior disorders. I would then approach principals in the identified schools to seek their consent in supporting the study by submitting the name of an educational assistant within their staff whom **they view** as demonstrating effective practice in their work with students with severe behavior disorders. Potential participants will be randomly selected from the pool of submitted names and will be individually approached until five agree to participate in the study. The principal will be informed that not all nominated staff members will be invited to participate in the research and the principal will not be informed as to whether or not his or her staff member is involved to eliminate any perception of coercion of participants through the nomination process. I will arrange to meet with each educational assistant selected from the pool of names, to discuss the nature of the study and to provide my written proposal for him or her to read. At this time I will inform the potential participant that although their name has been submitted by their principal as a potential staff member to take part in this study, they are under absolutely no obligation to be involved. I will confirm that several schools have been approached, the study is limited to five participants and the principal of each school knows that he or she will not be informed if their staff member is involved or not. I will then arrange another meeting within two weeks of the initial meeting with each participant to discuss his or her response to the proposal and seek consent to participate in the study. Before signing the consent form, participants will be clearly advised that if they at any time feel uncomfortable with the research, they may withdraw from the study without any repercussion, by simply informing me, either in writing or orally. The data from their participation will not be included in the study. Two individual interview sessions and one focus group interview will be conducted with the participants and I will keep a field journal throughout the process.

My full proposal and a copy of the ethics application are available to you should you need these documents to review before making a decision. Attached please find an abstract of the proposed research study, sample questions for the individual and focus group sessions, and the consent forms that would be sent to the school principal and the participants should you consent to your Board participating in the study. Upon completion of the research you will receive a copy of the dissertation and a commitment from me at no cost to your board to contribute to working together collaboratively, if you determine that you would like to address any of the outcomes of the study within your school division.

If you consent to allowing this research to be conducted within your school division, please mail the attached consent form to me. If you have questions or require additional information, I welcome the opportunity to speak to you and can be contacted at (phone number). Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Jan Sundmark

March 2001

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE RESEARCH CONSENT FORM: SUPERINTENDENT

If you are willing to allow your school jurisdiction to participate in this research study, please mail this page to:

(Address not included here)

A stamped addressed envelope is provided for you.

Research Study: Voice of the field: The practice of educational assistants working in classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders.

Research Method: Individual and focus group interviews with educational assistants working in the field.

I provide my consent for Jan Sundmark, a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta to contact elementary school principals within my jurisdiction whose sites are employing educational assistants to work with students with severe behavior disorders. I understand that the principals will be invited to submit the name of one educational assistant to a pool of potential participants who may or may not be involved in the study.

Signature:_____
(Superintendent of Schools)

Name (printed):_____Date:_____

Name of school district:_____

Names of elementary schools within jurisdiction employing educational assistants to meet the needs of students with severe behavior disorders:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

April 2001

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM: PRINCIPAL

If you are willing to allow an educational assistant who is working in your school with students who have severe behavior disorders to participate in this research study, please mail these two pages to:

(Address and phone number not included here)

A stamped addressed envelope is provided for you.

Research Study: Voice of the field: The practice of educational assistants working in classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders.

Research Method: Individual and focus group interviews with educational assistants working in the field.

Sample questions attached.

I provide my consent for Jan Sundmark, a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta to contact an educational assistant that I will identify within my school, to participate in this research study. I understand that:

- I am submitting a staff member's name to a pool of potential participants for this study, with no expectation of whether this staff member will agree to participate or not. As well, I know that I will not be informed if my staff member has been selected from the pool of potential participants.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially and discussed only with the participant and the researcher.
- Neither my school nor the participant will be identifiable within the published thesis or within any scholarly articles written for educators.
- Any information that identifies the participant will be destroyed upon completion of the doctoral thesis.

Signature:_____
(Principal)
Name (printed):_____
Jurisdiction: _____
School:_____
Nominated staff member (printed):_____
Date:_____
April 2001

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE CONSENT FORM: EDUCATIONAL ASSISTANT

(Individual and Focus Group Interview)

Research Study: Voice of the field: The practice of educational assistants working in classrooms with students who have severe behavior disorders.

I _____, hereby consent to be individually interviewed and I agree to participate in a focus group interview, both of which will be audio recorded and conducted by Jan Sundmark, a doctoral student in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta.

I understand that :

- Although my name has been submitted to a pool of potential participants by my principal, my principal has no expectation for me to be involved in this study and will not be informed if I am participating or not.
- I may withdraw from the research study at any time, without penalty or any kind of repercussion.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially and discussed only with the researcher.
- Neither I nor my school will be identifiable in any of the documents or publications resulting from this research.
- Any information that identifies me will be destroyed upon completion of the doctoral thesis.

I also understand that the results of this research will be used only in the publishing of the doctoral thesis, educational presentations, or scholarly articles written for other educators.

Signature:_____

Date:_____

Mailing address (for receipt of interview transcripts):

_____

_____

(Two copies provided, one for the participant and one for the researcher.)

May 2001

APPENDIX E

SAMPLE INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Provided to participants when requesting their consent to participate in the study.)

The opening question that was used for each of the six individual interviews was:

Tell me, what is it like to be an educational assistant in your classroom?

The following is a list of sample interview questions that were used throughout the interview depending on the individual's response to the opening question during the exploration phase of the interview process.

1. What issues do you see as related to your work?
2. How would you suggest these issues be resolved?
3. What do you need in order to do your job?
4. What kind of training has been helpful for your job?
5. What kinds of on-going training do you feel would be helpful for you in your job?
6. Describe a good day in your job.
7. What do you spend the majority of your time doing?
8. What do you wish you could do more of?
9. Tell me about a part of your job you would like to delegate to someone else.
10. What is it about your work that gives you joy?
11. Describe a time when you felt valued in your work.
12. What do you expect from the teacher(s) you are working with?
13. In what ways do you see yourself contributing to your classroom? To the school?
14. What advice would you give to a teacher working with an educational assistant for the first time?
15. What advice would you give to an educational assistant newly assigned to your classroom?
16. What do you think you will remember about your job later in life?

May 2001

Additional questions that were added from conversations with the participants during the individual interviews:

1. What makes you effective with the students you work with?
2. Think back to your first week of work, tell me what it was like.
3. Is there anything you would like to share that we have not talked about?

June 2001

APPENDIX F

SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

(Given to participants at the time when I was requesting their consent to participate in the research in order to provide an example of my intentions for the research at that time.)

The following are examples of information I hope to gain from the group discussion. Realizing the group will have its own dynamic, other issues will naturally arise from the discussion that are not apparent at this time. The purpose is to gain an understanding of the participants' priorities related to the focus of the study.

The participants' perspective of:

- the most important aspects of the work of educational assistants
- the issues related to the work of educational assistants
- some ways to resolve any of these issues
- the needs of educational assistants to effectively do their work
- specific in-service training needs of educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders
- expectations educational assistants have for the teaching staff they are working with
- the contributions educational assistants bring to the classroom, to the school
- the required knowledge, attitudes, habits and skills for educational assistants working with students with severe behavior disorders, ranked in order of importance
- needed advice for a teacher working with an educational assistant for the first time.

May 2001

APPENDIX G

SAMPLE COVER LETTER, FIRST FOCUS GROUP

Participant Focus Group Discussion

Thursday, March 7, 2002

(Location not included here)

Dear _____,
(name of participant)

I want to thank each of you for your patience and support in finding a common time for all six participants of our group to meet.

Attached you will find: an overview of the themes that have emerged from the individual interviews (not included in appendix); questions that we may use to guide our group discussion; and an information sheet that relates to personal data associated with the study.

If you have any questions or if you require any additional information please call me either at (phone numbers not included here). I'm really looking forward to seeing each of you again, you are truly a gifted group of individuals.

(Specific location information not included here)

Sincerely,

Jan Sundmark

February 2002

APPENDIX H

SAMPLE FIRST FOCUS GROUP REVISED QUESTIONS TO PARTICIPANTS

(Introductory comments not included)

Potential Focus Group Discussion

Questions related to the information gathered to date:

1. Are there additional comments you would like to make in any of these nine areas?
2. Do you feel any of the areas mentioned should not be included?
3. Are there additional areas you would like included?
4. Is there any additional information we can add to help teachers and administrators to understand what they need to do on a regular basis to enable assistants to be effective in their work?

Questions that have developed for me as a result of our individual interviews include:

1. If it is important to work as a team in the classroom, what's holding us back from doing more of this? What would it look like without the problem?
2. What are your worries working with a student with severe behavior?
3. If I were to spend a month working with you, what would I see you doing that makes you particularly effective in your work? How would you describe your capacity to make a difference?
4. When you think back on your work with students with severe behavior what stands out as a "defining moment" in your career?
5. What do you care most about in your work?
6. What should be included in pre-service training for teachers who will be working with an assistant supporting a student with severe behavior in their classroom?
7. What should be included in pre-service training for an assistant who will be supporting a student with severe behavior in a regular classroom?
8. **What outcomes would you like to see emerge from this research?**
9. Please bring other questions, comments, ideas, suggestions that you feel need to be added to the discussion at this session or to future discussions.

February 2002

APPENDIX I

SAMPLE PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION SHEET

Please complete and bring this page with you to the focus group. Thank you.

Name: _____

Current school assignment:_____

_____

Years of experience working as an educational assistant (please include part time assignments). _____

Years of experience working with students with severe behavior (please include part time assignments) _____

Hours or percentage of the work day you are assigned to support student with severe behavior disorders. _____

Training and/or related work experience that you feel has prepared you for this position.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

February 2002

APPENDIX J

SAMPLE SECOND FOCUS GROUP COVER LETTER

Dear _____,
(name of participant)

Thanks for the time and effort you took to attend our focus group session this month. Please find attached a copy of the transcript of the group discussion from this meeting. Your comments are identified as participant (not included here). If I have incorrectly documented any of the information you shared within the group session please let me know how you would like it to be changed or eliminated. An important part of this research is for the data to reflect the voice of the participants and as a result I am dependent on you to provide the feedback necessary to accurately portray your perspective.

I appreciate the different perspectives voiced by participants throughout the session. It is critical for the validity of the data that we identify the commonality and differences in practice based on your knowledge of the field and your background experience. The questions posed by participants throughout the session helped to clarify the topic of discussion at the time and I appreciate the willingness of individuals to bring them forward to the group.

We really need another group session in which each of you can share your experiences and knowledge as we continue to develop the topics associated with this research. Could you look at your schedule to see if it is possible to meet on Friday, April 26th. (specific information not included here).

Until then, I will continue to work with the data and will send you a list of potential questions prior to the next session. Please bring your questions and topics for discussion you would like to share with the group or let me know ahead of time and I'll include them with the next mailing.

Could you please (specific phone numbers and information not included here) will work for you and if it won't could you please suggest an alternate date that would be better for you?

Take care and I hope you are enjoying the opportunity to work together in an attempt to make changes in the field to benefit educational assistants, students, teachers and administrators.

Sincerely,

Jan Sundmark

March 2002

APPENDIX K

SECOND FOCUS GROUP REVISED QUESTIONS

The following are a list of questions that have emerged from the information collected to date. Could you add you additional thoughts to these areas?

1. What would increased respect and increased support from teachers, administrators, parents and/or the public in your position look like for you?
2. How do you establish yourself as an authority figure in the classroom with the other students?
3. In addition to what has been said by participants to date, what else should be included in pre-service or in-service training for educational assistants working with students with severe behaviors?
4. In addition to what has been provided to date, what else should be included in pre-service or in-service training for teachers who will be working with an educational assistant and with students who have severe behavior disorders?
5. What do you see yourself doing that makes you effective in your work with students with severe behavior disorders?
6. If it is important to work as a team in the classroom, what's holding us back from doing more of this? What would it look like without the problem?
7. What does your administration do that makes a significant difference for you in your work?
8. A participant mentioned, "teachers are more willing to help me when I have had a chance to build rapport with them." How do you build relationship with the teachers you work with?
9. What makes it hard to include students with severe behavior disorders in the regular classroom?
10. What factors are causing people to leave this position?
11. *Please bring additional comments, questions, insights or concerns that you may have for us to explore together. For example, what else needs to be included that we have not addressed to date?*

April 2002

APPENDIX L

SAMPLE MEMBER CHECK LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

(Provided to participants when I met with each of them to briefly discuss the findings)

Dear _____
(name of participant)

Attached you will find a draft copy of two chapters of my dissertation that report the information you shared during our interviews. Chapter Four provides the data and Chapter Five is my interpretation of that data. Please let me know if there is anything that you feel has been misrepresented in this material.

A significant challenge for me throughout the writing was reducing the data to a manageable amount while maintaining the integrity of your comments. Some of the information provided within the interviews that is not addressed within these sections will be provided in Chapter Six which contains recommendations for the field and for further research.

You have been given a pseudonym to protect your identity within this study which is a requirement of this type of research. (Additional personal information not included here).

If there is anything that you feel needs to be deleted or added please let me know as soon as you can to enable me to make the necessary changes. When I have successfully defended my thesis, you will receive a copy of the entire document because without you, this would not have been possible.

I can be reached at (phone, email not included here). Please do not hesitate to contact me to share your ideas.

Take care.

Sincerely,

Jan Sundmark

February 2003